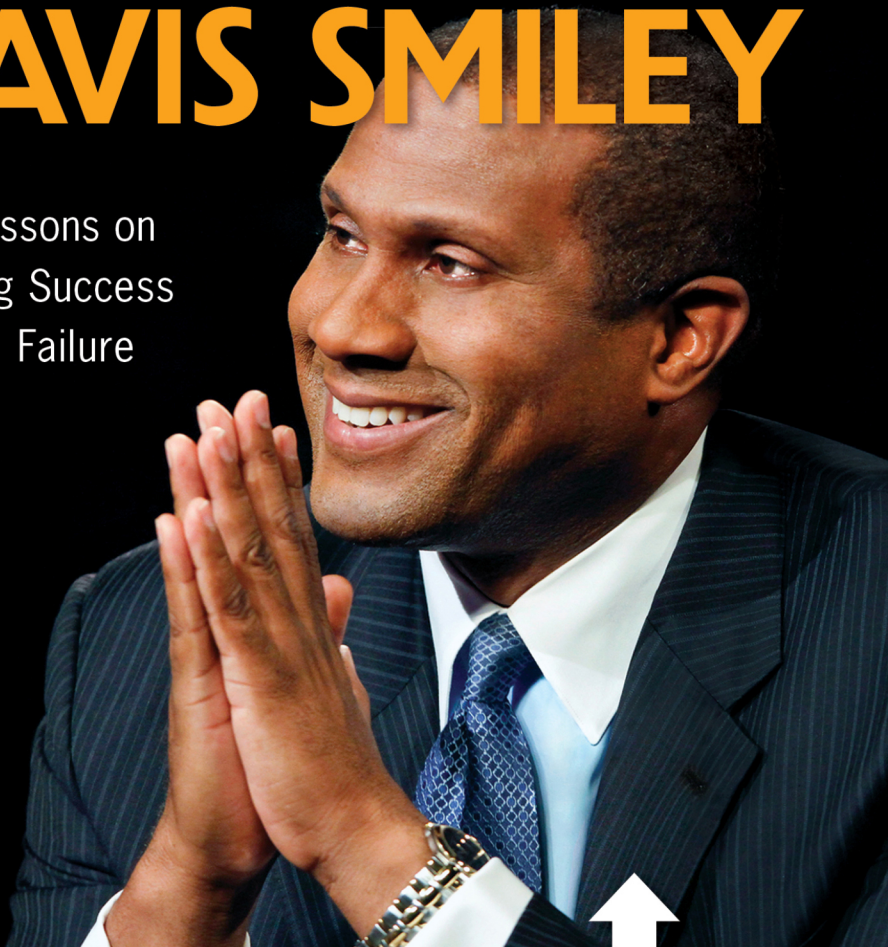


*New York Times* best-selling author of *What I Know for Sure*

# TAVIS SMILEY

20 Lessons on  
Building Success  
from Failure

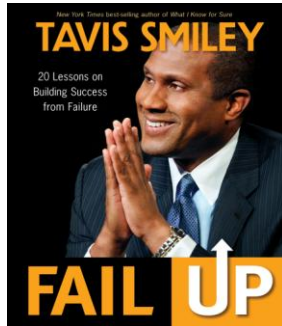


**FAIL**

**UP**

***FAIL UP***  
***20 Lessons on Building Success from Failure***  
by Tavis Smiley

*Award-winning broadcaster reflects on the failures that helped make him a success*



**Praise for Tavis Smiley**

“You have *Oprah* and you have *Tavis*—they are the *king* and *queen*.”  
—*The New York Times*

“Smiley is a reminder of the days when talk show hosts were conversationalists, not sycophants or joke meters.”  
—*Los Angeles Times*

“Tavis has to go no further than his life to find a good story. It is a story of rising out of poverty with a purpose, of hearing the music of a dream, his hopes to be not just a broadcaster or a businessman but also a leader, a builder.”  
—Charlie Rose

***“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” – Samuel Beckett***

In 2009, *TIME* magazine named Tavis Smiley to their list of “The World’s 100 Most Influential People.” Surely such an overachiever could never be labeled a failure. Successful business owner, notable philanthropist, host of his own national television and radio programs—these aren’t the descriptions we’d normally hear about someone who’d been fired or arrested, who left college degreeless, or said “no” to a dream-come-true opportunity in the profession he longed to break into.

Yet all of these—and more—describe a Tavis Smiley who has embraced his “success scars” in ***FAIL UP: 20 Lessons on Building Success from Failure*** (ISBN: 978-1-4019-3390-6, \$19.95, SmileyBooks hardcover, 288 pages). After an existential crisis on his 40th birthday left him feeling like he’d never accomplish all he wanted to in this life and thus die a failure, Tavis undertook an unprecedented self-examination. Realizing his own success, like so many others’, was born out of overcoming setbacks and failures, Tavis set about putting his story into words to help others understand the universal truth: There is no success without failure.

*“Very few achievers want to then show off their warts by acknowledging the mistakes they’ve made along the way,”* Tavis writes. *“I think that’s unfortunate. Millions of people struggle with what it means to be successful, and the lesson they take away from successful folk who hide or deny their failures leads to an artificial construct of success.”*

***FAIL UP*** is a lesson plan for those confronted by the inevitable letdowns, fall-throughs, and setbacks of life. Broken out into 20 chapters, Tavis’ testimonies are pulled from his life, as well as

today's headlines and significant historical examples of how to overcome odds that appear insurmountable at first. We hear Tavis' mother teach her young son a lesson in humility after Muhammad Ali inspires youthful boastfulness in him. An unceremonious sacking by BET provides inspiring insight for those facing career struggles. And an old, revered boss speaks with his former assistant later in life to warn him about a growing problem—his waistline. The stories in ***FAIL UP*** range from the private and personal to the public and professional, inspiring and challenging us to take what looks like an ending and make it a new, better, more true beginning.

Within ***FAIL UP***, Tavis examines:

- How the mayor of Bloomington, Indiana taught a young Tavis a lesson about integrity and forgiveness, even after the trust of his employer and the public had been violated.
- How financial illiteracy and a steady diet of \$7 pizzas landed a young, ambitious Tavis behind bars.
- What being “on,” all the time, in the Internet age means, as he recounts how an interview with filmmaker Robert Townsend nearly went disastrously off script.
- How he nearly scuttled an equality campaign against CompUSA when he didn't check all the facts and “do his homework.”
- How turning down a major television opportunity and risking his future in broadcasting ultimately realigned Tavis with his destiny.
- How “running his mouth” cost him a potential mate and life-long access to a major Hollywood celebrity.
- How his best laid life plans could never trump God's plan that allowed him to achieve and succeed beyond his wildest imagination.

Whether young or old, student or professional, media mogul or nine-to-fiver, ***FAIL UP*** shows how we all can turn a step backward into a surge forward if we seize the opportunities found in failure.

If you would like more information about this title please contact Kira Citron at [kcitron@hayhouse.com](mailto:kcitron@hayhouse.com) or call 646-484-4963.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

From his celebrated conversations with world figures, to his work inspiring the next generation of leaders; as a broadcaster, author, advocate, and philanthropist, Tavis Smiley continues to be an outstanding voice for change. Smiley hosts the late night television talk show *Tavis Smiley*, on PBS; *The Tavis Smiley Show*, distributed by Public Radio International (PRI); and is a co-host of *Smiley & West* (PRI). He has authored or edited 14 books, including his *New York Times* bestselling memoir *What I Know For Sure*. Smiley is also the presenter and creative force behind America I AM: *The African American Imprint*—an unprecedented and award-winning traveling museum exhibition celebrating the extraordinary impact of African American contributions to our nation and to the world. In 2009, *TIME* magazine named him to their list of “The World's 100 Most Influential People.” This year, 2011, marks his 20th year in broadcasting.

## The *FAIL UP* Tour

10-City National Book Tour/ 13-Book Signings  
April–May 2011

**1) Thursday, April 21, 2011**

The Grove Los Angeles  
189 The Grove  
Los Angeles, CA 90036  
Time: 7 pm – 9 pm  
**Admission: Free**

**2) Friday, April 22, 2011**

Museum of African American Art  
Macy's 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Mall  
4005 Crenshaw Blvd.  
Los Angeles, CA. 90008  
Time: 7pm – 9pm  
**Admission: Free**

**3) Tuesday, April 26, 2011**

92 Street Y  
1395 Lexington Ave  
New York, NY 10128  
Time: 8 pm – 10 pm  
**Admission: \$29.00**

**4) Wednesday, April 27, 2011**

“An Evening with Tavis Smiley”  
WNYC – Cooper Union  
41 Cooper Square  
New York, NY  
Reception: 5:45 pm – 7 pm  
Time: 7 pm – 9 pm  
**Admission: \$30.00**

**5) Saturday, April 30, 2011**

Special Occasions Book Store  
112 North Martin Luther King Drive  
Winston – Salem, NC 27101  
Time: 12:30 pm – 2:00 pm  
**Admission: Free**

**6) Thursday, May 5, 2011**

Barnes and Noble Book Store  
555 12th St NW  
Washington, DC 20004  
Time: 12 pm – 2 pm  
**Admission: Free**

**7) Friday, May 6, 2011 Philadelphia**

“An Evening with Tavis Smiley”

WHYY

Levitt Auditorium  
Gershman Hall  
401 South Broad Street  
(corner of Broad & Pine Streets)  
Philadelphia, PA 19102  
Reception: 6 pm – 7 pm  
Time: 7 pm – 9 pm  
**Admission:**  
**WHYY Members: \$15**  
**Non Members: \$20**

**8) Tuesday, May 10, 2011**

The Commonwealth Club  
595 Market Ave  
San Francisco, CA 94105  
Time: 12 pm – 2 pm  
**Admission:**  
**Commonwealth Members: \$12**  
**Non Members: \$20**  
**Students: \$7 students**

**9) Tuesday, May 10, 2011**

Marcus Book Store  
3900 Martin Luther King Junior Way  
Oakland, CA 94609  
(510) 652-2344  
Time: 6:30 pm – 8:30 pm  
**Admission: Free**

**10) Thursday, May 12, 2011**

Barnes and Noble Book Store  
2900 Peachtree Road NE  
Atlanta, GA 30305  
Time: 7 pm – 9 pm  
**Admission: Free**

**11) Friday, May 13, 2011**

Barnes and Noble Book Store  
7626 Westheimer  
Houston, TX 77063  
Time: 7 pm – 9 pm  
**Admission: Free**

**12) Thursday, May 19, 2011**

“An Evening with Tavis Smiley”  
WYCC  
6528 South Union Ave  
Chicago, IL 60621  
Reception: 6 pm – 7 pm  
Time: 7 pm – 9 pm  
**Admission: TBD**

**13) Saturday, May 21, 2011**

St. Sabina Church  
1210 West 78th Place  
Chicago, IL 60620-3701  
Time: 12 pm – 2 pm  
**Admission: Free**

## Q&A with TAVIS SMILEY

Author of  
*FAIL UP*

### *20 Lessons on Building Success from Failure*

1. **Q: The idea that failure can be good for us is not something we hear often. What made you want to explore this idea in *FAIL UP*?**

**A:** When I turned 40, I reached a crisis point in my life; I didn't believe I would ever succeed at all the things I wanted to. The fact is that it's true—and that's a beautiful thing. As Samuel Beckett put it, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." This brilliant philosophy pulled together what I then understood as an inherent truth: Failure is inevitable. How we respond to failure is the key.

Looking back at my own life, I, like many who have succeeded in spite of failure, have achieved what I have because I took life's setbacks and turned them into steps forward. My decision to share what were at times embarrassing public and private shortcomings wasn't easy. The reality, though, is that we all struggle and we all want to succeed. Not sharing this most crucial lesson of success—that it begins by turning failures into "fail up" opportunities—would be far worse than any of the blemishes and mishaps I have suffered.

2. **Q: Much of *FAIL UP* is pulled from your life. How is it different than your previous books, specifically your memoir?**

**A:** There're a lot of similarities between *FAIL UP* and my memoir. But they are, at their core, very different books. My memoir was the retelling of important segments of my life. It was a chance to share my story with my fans and supporters. But like most memoirs it was a one-way street.

*FAIL UP*, on the other hand, is more of a conversation. Yes, my life and experiences are at the center of the message that adversity can become an asset if you approach it correctly. But *FAIL UP* pulls from the challenges and successes of many others. Many of them are personal heroes of mine. Others are people in the spotlight, whether in sports or politics. I also share the story of everyday folk experiencing a real teachable moment. Through all these threads *FAIL UP* weaves together a powerful, crucial message that challenges readers to become agents of change in their own lives—by daring to change their minds.

3. **Q: Were you concerned about exposing so much about your own personal vulnerabilities and failings?**

**A:** Those who know me know I'm not one to let my dirty laundry flap in the breeze. I like to keep the drama to a minimum. That said, I think it's a mistake for successful people to not "show their warts." Failing—regardless of what sphere of our life—is inevitable; there is no success without failure. That's just a fact.

All of the stories I've shared in *FAIL UP* are personal, even the ones that were well-publicized. Yet they have all been lessons that have been fundamental to my ability to succeed—"failing up" in one part of my life has meant being better prepared in another. In our lives, gaining the leverage of experience from one type of setback can be the essential piece to understanding how to move forward in somewhere else. If I was going to talk about the value of failing up, I felt it was too important *not* to share my whole self in this way.

**4. Q: What personal "fail up" of yours do you think readers will be most surprised by?**

**A:** I can say for sure that some of my earlier indiscretions and mistakes might have some folks shaking their head. Yes, even Tavis Smiley has had run-ins with the law. The section where I find out firsthand what writing bad checks can do to a person, I think, will both surprise and, hopefully, scare some young folks straight.

The other fail up moment I think people will come away surprised by is when I delve into a personal indiscretion I committed while in a relationship, which I detail later in the book. Like I said, I'm not one for letting all my dirty laundry air for just anyone to see, but this situation was a very real, personal reminder of how one's professional life can be impacted by the wrong things said, at the wrong time, to the wrong people in your private life. I learned the lesson the hard way: Loose lips really do sink ships.

**5. Q: You experienced a number of "fail up" lessons at a young age. How important is it that young people are given the opportunity to "fail up"?**

**A:** Kids can do some pretty dumb things—I know I did—but it doesn't mean mistakes should become life sentences. With the right guidance and compassion, a young person's shortcomings can become a valuable moment of maturation. It's important for adults to remember they, too, can allow a young person to "fail up" simply by taking the opportunity to help that young person become a better person for their failure, rather than beating them down or branding them for life.

**6. Q: The headlines are filled with stories of governments—from the federal level down to school boards—struggling, battling and disappearing. How does "failing up" figure into the crisis in government we see at every level?**

**A:** Having worked for two mayors, interviewed many elected officials, and run for office myself, I can tell you: governments are made up of people, and are as susceptible to the same foibles and failings we are. Yet there's a unique breed of crisis we face today—one driven by poor planning, shortsightedness and an unrealistic belief in an unsustainable situation.

Amid the caustic rhetoric and systemic upheaval, though, is a real opportunity for not only politicians to rethink the role of government—its scope, function and commitments—at every level, but for citizens to reengage. It's a chance to make government work for *all* of us, not just the wealthiest or most well-connected. We have an opportunity to bring America closer to being the best she can be, but it will take all of us participating—consciously, with genuine engagement.

**7. Q: In a world where nothing is "off the record," as you point out, how do we keep from living completely inhibited lives?**

**A:** In a world where social media and our total interconnectedness amplify even the smallest statement into skywriting for everyone to see, we've entered a new era of hyper-scrutiny. But in a way



I think the fail up response to this situation is to live less inhibited in reality. It means recognizing the value of things like a face-to-face conversation or a handwritten letter. I hope our inhibitions can fail up to become motivation to live more personally-connected lives.

**8. Q: With unemployment becoming long-term for many Americans, what do you hope *FAIL UP* will mean for those still struggling in their job search?**

**A:** Let me be clear up front: too many Americans today are suffering through no fault of their own. Despite some encouraging signs that the worst is behind us, many parts of America—not least of which is the African American community, which continues to lag behind in employment—don’t feel like things are getting better. In the face of this adversity, we have a choice: give in or grab hold. My hope is that *FAIL UP* will motivate people through powerful examples, helping them to focus on what’s possible, even in these challenging times.

**9. Q: Keeping quiet in the face of insults and injuries is difficult for many of us—how have you learned to keep your cool after some memorable “fail ups” in this area?**

**A:** Like I say in the book, I am still working to better my best. Failing up isn’t always a one-off situation. Sometimes it’s a long-haul process. Retaining your dignity and remaining civil, even when we are right to be angry or hurt, is one of the hardest things to do. When I feel myself approaching my limits, I try and reach back to the lessons I’ve learned. Fail up moments are touchstones; they bring us back to earth when we feel ourselves going through the roof.

What I try to do, and what I think is missing in a lot of what we see around us today, is something we all learned as kids: think ahead! Understanding the consequences of your words and actions—the damaging as well as the dignified—can go far in turning down the heat before everyone gets burned.

**10. Q: Throughout *FAIL UP* you are able to hear the right words, at the right time—whether it be from a parent, a colleague or yourself. How difficult a process do you think listening is today, considering how bombarded we are in our culture with voices telling us what to do?**

**A:** It’s hard enough to just turn the volume down on the noise all around us, let alone tune in to the messages we need to hear. Much of my ability to hone in on what was important I just credit to the Lord—at times it seemed like His grace was the only thing that pulled me through. Even with that being the case, opening ourselves up to receive that grace can be difficult these days, especially for young people.

That only makes it that much more important that we attenuate ourselves to the places broadcasting the right messages. Whether it’s our families, our churches or our favorite musicians, the first step is figuring out where to focus our limited time and attentions. It can make all the difference, as I’ve found out.

**11. Q: Entrepreneurship is a theme throughout *FAIL UP*. Is learning how to grow from failure an essential ingredient for those looking to become entrepreneurs?**

**A:** I would challenge anyone to find a successful entrepreneur who hasn’t encountered not one or two, but many “fail up” moments. It’s a prerequisite for greatness. In the book I point to numerous examples of people who turned adversity into advantage after their initial plans fell through. As an entrepreneur myself I can tell you that through failing up I have been able to achieve what I have. Understanding this simple truth has been one of mine and others’ most powerful tools moving through the phases of success.

**12. Q: The story of returning to finish your degree, even after establishing yourself as a successful broadcaster, is inspirational. What do you hope those who either haven't pursued or finished their college education will take away from that story?**

**A:** I truly believe in the power of education. I made sure I went to college and my siblings did so as well. My parents, who hadn't had the opportunity, knew how important it was. Succeeding in today's world means getting a college degree—there's no way around it.

However, life can get in the way. Sometimes it's the best sort of obstacle—the one that puts us on the right path. Still, getting a college education is more than simply prepping for the working world and getting your degree means more than just finishing your classes. Finishing what you start tells employers, friends and family that you're ready for the real world.

So to those who haven't started their college education, it's never too late. For those that haven't finished—it's never too late!

**13. Q: As a former campaigning politician, does your own “fail up” moment running for office make you more or less sympathetic to folks who have gone through the same experience?**

**A:** I guess the short answer is “neither.” I certainly understand—maybe better than most—that politicians and elected officials are, at the end of the day, just human beings, even as they pursue truly sacred, highly accountable positions. They, too, can make mistakes. They can also be brilliant. I have always tried to treat those in the political world—whether they were my bosses or guests on my shows—with the respect, decency, and attentiveness that we all deserve. When they're right, we should celebrate it. When they're wrong, they need to be told, but in either case it's important to remember that they are just people, like you and me. My personal fail up experience running for office has only reinforced this truth.

**14. Q: Faith is a major component throughout *FAIL UP*. Do you believe the Lord wants everyone to fail up?**

**A:** Absolutely. As human beings, cracked vessels that we are, God has built us to fail. Only through failure are we able to realize how human we are and to see the path that God has laid before us. We all fail at points in our lives and think that we've got things figured out better than God, whether it's in our careers, in our personal lives, or even in what we think we want to major in college. But believe me, what God has in store for us cannot be avoided. Failing up is, in many ways, the process of realigning ourselves with the path that we were meant to be on all along—we just got lost along the way.

That path is different for everyone but each of us has tremendous potential in what the Lord has called us to do. I am blessed every day that God has called me to do what I do, but there is also an inherent responsibility. In that way it doesn't matter if God is calling you to be President of the

United States or president of the local PTA, your gifts are suited to make you the best at what you are, and in the process be the best you can be for those around you.

**15. Q: You speak candidly about the backlash you received over your critique of the Obama presidential bid. How, halfway through President Obama’s first term, do you see your positions holding up and is there a “fail up” moment for you amid the dissonance?**

**A:** When I level critiques against candidates and elected officials, it has always come from a place of deep love and concern for Main Street, not Wall Street; for those catching hell, not for those providing it. So while I believe that President Obama has made significant progress on a number of fronts, my concerns remain the same. I think that, increasingly, folks of all stripes who might have found themselves deeply connected on an emotional level to then-candidate Obama have begun to realize that President Obama is not a superhero or magician. He’s just who he is; a highly intelligent, incredibly gifted, highly driven leader who is doing what he can do, with what he has.

But he, like all leaders, can only be as great as we, the people he leads, *push* him to be. And in that sense I continue to feel a responsibility to push President Obama—like presidents Bush and Clinton before him—to be not good, but great. Had I not focused on the need for taking the principled stand I did—to ensure that *all* the candidates in that race focused on the real issues we face—I would be looking back now, after the smoke has cleared and the real world challenges resurface, wishing I had done what was right, not what was easy. I thank God I gained this “fail up” clarity without having to first fail.

**16. Q: While not everyone has as elevated a problem as you did when you critiqued then-candidate Barack Obama during the 2008 elections, most people face moments when a majority—whether parents, friends, coworkers or society—pressures them to do something they don’t believe in. How did your experience in 2008 help you face other, inevitable moments when your beliefs were challenged?**

**A:** In a sense, I think the reverse is closer to the truth. I went through those tough moments earlier in my life, such as when I decided to run for office against nearly everyone’s advice, or when I chose not to take a TV job that everyone thought I should (both of which are detailed in the book), that prepared me for the larger, more difficult challenges ahead. But it goes back further than this, to the lessons my parents taught me and the fundamental faith I took from my church growing up. All of these helped me first understand what was right, and then gave me the strength to stay the course.

**17. Q: Your departure from BET has been well recorded. What motivated you to publish the actual notice of termination in *FAIL UP*?**

**A:** I wanted to show very visibly what I was confronted with so that other people who receive letters like this—and there a lot of folks out there these days—could have that immediate connection. As you can see, it wasn’t a death sentence! In fact, it’s one of the greatest fail up moments I have ever experienced. By showing my termination letter, I hope to help others escape the blame-game spiral of self-doubt and self-pity, and instead see it as a new lease on life.

**18. Q: In *FAIL UP*, you recall being approached by former Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley with a special message: You had to lose weight. How difficult has it been to keep the weight off and remain true to that “fail up” moment?**

**A:** I wouldn’t be telling the truth if I didn’t admit that this has been one of those long-haul fail up realizations. There have been ups and downs when it comes to my weight, but like my commitment to check my temper at the door, I have continued to focus on being healthier. Today I am proud to

say that I eat better than I ever have before, work out regularly, and have kept the weight down to a respectable level. It hasn't been easy, but succeeding at what's important rarely is—but it always feels better in the end.

**19. Q: You describe in a passage of *FAIL UP* how a run-in with a college professor ultimately kept you degreeless for a decade and a half. In retrospect, you recognized that being right led you to make the wrong decision. How hard is it to remain graceful in these sorts of situations, even today?**

**A:** For me, as someone who stands very firmly on the principles that I hold dear and believe in, it has always been difficult for me to remain silent when I know someone else is in the wrong in a principled way. Sometimes, though, that sense of righteousness has gotten me in a bind. When righteousness isn't combined with a sense of grace, it can produce some damaging results. What I learned from the episode in the book—and what I've taken to heart through that fail up experience—is that exercising a little bit of grace can go a long way towards doing what's best. Because being right in every situation isn't always what's best, for you or for other people. It's been an invaluable lesson that, as a broadcaster and public figure, I rely on regularly.

**20. Q: Many public figures get in hot water over false or misleading statements. Some, like Dan Rather, as you mention in the book, even lose their jobs. How did your “fail up” experience you share in the book change the way you approach your profession?**

**A:** I think in a certain sense, I was lucky. That was pre-Internet Age and we were, ultimately, able to prove that we were right to hold the company we protested accountable for their discriminatory practices, despite my mistake. In today's environment—whether in the classroom, on the job, or in the media—checking your facts, and then double-checking your facts, and then triple-checking your facts, is the only sure way to keep from doing considerable harm to yourself and others. Accuracy is more important today than ever, and because of the slipup discussed in *FAIL UP* I am more careful than ever to be accurate.

## Tavis' 20: Quotes from *FAIL UP*

### From the Introduction:

Most people who have ever succeeded in any human endeavor will tell you they learned more from their failures than they ever learned from their successes. If they're being honest.

### From Before Honor Comes Humility:

If arrogance is the disease, then humility is the cure. If we want to create a balance where our passions don't elicit accusations of arrogance, then we must strive for abundant doses of humility. This trait silences the ego's chatter and helps fill our lives and our world with positive, progressive, and holistic energy.

### From Cheaters Never Win:

[Y]ou can correct and even reprimand somebody, but, at the same time, you can also affirm that person. If you are in a position of power, you can also offer a second chance. This simple but powerful act gives the accused a chance to not only learn from the transgression, but it also provides the incentive to never risk losing that respected person's trust again.

### From Don't Do Me No Favors:

[M]ake sure you always give before you get. Be it in your personal or business life, reciprocity is sweeter when the exchange of services, favors, or goods is mutual.

### From You're Always On:

Today, there is no "off the record." The mike is always on. Somebody's always watching, listening, and recording. Unintentional or careless remarks can seriously compromise or derail your future. Increasingly, today's breaking news stories involve somebody's digital camcorder or cell phone camera.

### From Remain Civilized Even When You're Justified:

When we conduct ourselves with dignity, we walk through the world with an inviolable sense of respect that invites emulation. Respect for others means we commit to making sacrifices. We sacrifice the temporary gratification of ego. We restrain the psychological trigger that can turn our words into weapons. We forfeit the emotional rewards derived from acting out, losing control, or reacting violently—even when we feel justified in doing so.

### From Do Your Homework:

There is no substitute for diligence and double-checking all the facts. Developing the discrimination necessary to avoid taking everything at face value and promptly acknowledging and correcting mistakes publicly are equally essential skills.

### From Loose Lips Can Sink Ships:

Technology has accelerated the power to inform, misinform, and destroy a zillion times faster than words we let slip between our lips.

**From Living for the City:**

However bad things are, it can always get worse. Sometimes we lose sight of that significant message. We have to remind ourselves that things can also get better...Whenever we're feeling picked on by the universe, striving to accept our discomfort as a stage in our development may save our sanity. There's power in accepting unexpected circumstances and challenges as the perfect pause before completion. Don't give delays or unexpected setbacks more energy than they deserve.

**From Give the People What They Want:**

Our troubled world needs visionaries. Money is important, I know that. But the sole pursuit of money can lead to an empty life. Find that vocation, that calling, that purpose you are uniquely suited for—become the best at it, and I sincerely believe you will get paid.

**From The Diversity Imperative:**

Too many conversations revolve around the concerns of the rich and lucky or the so-called middle class. Few talk about the poor, the disenfranchised, or the underprivileged. The "haves" get attention, while the "have-nots" languish out of sight.

**From And the Winner Is...Not Me:**

When faced with failed endeavors or job loss, you don't have to know the exact steps to rebound, but it does help to know what opportunities link to your strengths. The opportunities may not pay much money, but they may further your new direction.

**From Get Ready to Be Ready:**

The truth of life is that it isn't always up, but it's not always down either. Life, by definition, is a series of ups and downs. It really boils down to high-quality choices. The challenge is making the right choice about which opportunity to latch on to.

**From Power Vs. Principle:**

We Americans are to be blamed for the way corporations, major media outlets, politicians, or political parties serve us. Without unshakable principles and standards, we become easy targets for exploitation. Popularity should never trump the will of the people.

**From When Everybody Turns Against You:**

We cannot start a process where politicians—Black, white, or "other"—are given passes on addressing African American concerns because it might hurt their chances of getting elected. If we start that process, it can't be reversed so easily.

**From When Everybody Turns Against You:**

[I]f we're not forever vigilant, there is an imminent possibility that symbolism will trump substance in the Obama era.

**From Father Knows Best:**

[E]ven when things aren't equal, if it's meant for you to receive God's grace, you're going to get it. The world can't give it, and the world can't take it away.

## EXCERPTS FROM

### *FAIL UP: 20 Lessons on Building Success from Failure*

#### From the Introduction

By the age of 38, I had accomplished much: writing popular books, hosting national television and radio programs, being featured on the covers of magazines and newspapers, and so much more. I was even financially secure with a comfortable net worth.

Then I turned 39.

The fear that I would not make it to 40 began to overtake me. And what was worse is that I felt like I was a failure. Even though I was just one person—and a cracked vessel at that—I knew I hadn't done enough. For all that I had tried to accomplish, the problems in my community and my country and the world seemed so intractable. Poverty. Sicknes. Crime. Racism. Environmental abuse. Child neglect. Educational inequities. War.

The night I turned 40, I was alone in a hotel room in Houston and had a major panic attack. The details of that night are so traumatic, forgive me for not wanting to relive them here. But shortly thereafter, I did share my nightmare in Houston with my abiding friend, Dr. Cornel West, over dinner.

Doc and I had talked many times before about my fear of dying young, so he understood the reason for the episode. But there was one part of my story he couldn't quite rationalize.

"How, at 40 years old, could you think that you are a failure?" he asked.

After I answered his question, Doc began to share with me his unique take on the matter of life and death:

"Tavis, the older I get, the more I think that there really is no such thing as penultimate success. I believe that every one of us essentially dies a failure."

Huh? Doc knew I was having trouble with his reasoning, so he pressed on:

"If one dies at 39, like Martin and Malcolm, or if one lives to be 139, you're not going to get it all done. There are going to be ideas you will never develop, projects you will never complete, conversations you will never have, people you will never meet, places you will never go, relationships you will never establish, forgiveness you will never receive, and books and speeches you will never write or deliver. We all die incomplete."

"So," Doc added, "the central question becomes: How good is your failure?" With that, he dropped the Beckett quote on me:

*"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."*

Doc was right. Ultimately, life is about failing better. Every day you wake up, you get another chance to get it right, to come up from failure, to fail up.

In working with young people through our foundation, I no longer use the phrase *just do your best*. If what you give the world is your best, then how do you get better?

The conversation with Dr. West freed me because it gave me a different perspective on the true meaning and the real value of failure.

Beckett's quote has become one of my favorites. I share it with young or old, Black or white, whenever I have the opportunity. Motivational speaker Les Brown says, "When life knocks you down, try to land on your back. Because if you can look up, you can get up."

Failure is an inevitable part of the human journey. *Fail up* is the trampoline needed when you're down. When you take the time to learn your lessons, when you use those lessons as stepping-stones to climb even higher than you were before, you transcend failure—you "fail up."

As I celebrate 20 years as a broadcaster, now is the time to show my scars. I hope the 20 lessons presented in the following chapters will offer you a new way to think about your failures.

I'm a witness. You *can* fail up.

## From Chapter 2: Cheaters Never Win

### *Cheater*

The off-campus shooting of Denver Smith on September 12, 1983, rocked the worlds of students and faculty members at Indiana University in Bloomington. Denver—a football star, husband, father to a brand-new baby girl, and my kindhearted friend—was shot in the back four times by local police officers. Police spokesmen told reporters that Smith, 24 at the time, was acting "erratically and deranged." He was scuffling with officers when they shot him in the back.

This incident was the first encounter that I, a kid from the small town of Kokomo, Indiana, had with what many of us on campus perceived as racism and prejudice. As a sophomore and the highest-ranking Black person in student government, I was often quoted in the media denouncing what had happened to Denver.

The case took its legal route but, in the process, Bloomington Mayor Tomilea Allison assembled a blue-ribbon commission: the Bloomington Community Progress Council. The group was charged with developing an agenda that would advance the city socially, culturally, and economically. It also recommended community outreach efforts that might, hopefully, prevent another high-profile incident like the one that robbed Denver Smith of his life.

Our initial introduction—me, as an angry advocate for police accountability, and Mayor Allison, as the city's top official and defender of all things city-related—was somewhat antagonistic. Still, she took a liking to me and gave me the opportunity to intern for her.

The biggest part of my job was to serve as the mayor's liaison to the prestigious community progress council. Imagine the opportunity: There I was—a 20-year-old pre-law/public policy major with a small office in the mayor's suite. Not only was I studying it at school, I was also helping to shape public policy every day.

It was beyond cool.

Mayor Allison trusted me implicitly, so much so that I was allowed to fill out my own time card. To this day, if you asked what motivated me to start padding my time sheet, I don't know that I can offer an honest answer. It began almost imperceptibly. If I worked six hours, I'd put down eight. If I worked eight, I'd put down ten.

I justified my actions by rationalizing that I wasn't really doing anything *that* bad. They only paid me minimum wage—a meager amount for the huge investment of my time and energy on the mayor's project. Besides, I needed the extra cash. I was the first person on either my mother or



father's side of the family to ever go to college. The debate team and trying to keep my grades up dominated my busy schedule. I could not let the lack of money jeopardize my success. *Survival* was the excuse I leaned on to blot everything my parents and my church had taught me about honesty and trust.

The trust the mayor had in me was not shared by other members of her staff. One day, I was told to report to the office of the deputy mayor, a no-nonsense man who wasn't exactly enthralled with the mayor's choice for community liaison.

The deputy mayor laid out undeniable evidence that proved I had been cheating on my time sheets. I was busted. He immediately checked off the procedure he'd recommend to the mayor—notify the police, have me arrested, fire me, and publicly humiliate me for my actions.

What?! Until that moment, I had never connected padding a few hours here and there with the police, being arrested, or going to jail! At first I was just humiliated. I had betrayed everything I had learned in life about "truth, truth, and more truth." But the more the deputy mayor talked, the quicker my humiliation escalated to fear of going to jail.

I dreaded with all my heart meeting with Mayor Allison the following day. The solemn look in her eyes alone reduced me to Jell-O®.

"Tavis, you have disappointed me. I never expected this from you," the mayor said. She never expected me to be a "fabricator, a cheater, a thief." Without hesitating for a response, she added that I wasn't just a "thief," I was the "worst kind of thief" because I stole "the people's money."

In my meeting with the deputy mayor, there was humiliation but no emotion. I didn't shed a tear. Mayor Allison had me at "disappointed," but when she hit me with the cold hard fact that I had stolen from taxpayers, that I had violated the people's trust . . . well, as my grandfather used to say, "I gave up all kinda water."

## From Chapter 4: You're Always On

### *Turn It Off, For Goodness' Sake*

No matter how we shuffle the communications cards, the indisputable fact is that we are all under surveillance. And I'm not just talking about "Big Brother" or sophisticated recording devices in the sky. I'm referring to the immediate and frequently irreversible repercussions of technology in the hands of the average Joe or Jane on the street.

My failure those many years ago to recognize the fine line between public and private speech underscores why all of us—public figures, politicians, preachers, and everyday folk—are required to be more circumspect and exercise far more discernment in the Information Age. If we dare to ignore the personal and professional repercussions involved when unintentional or careless remarks go public, we set ourselves up for far more than Facebook boomerangs. Just ask the diplomatic professionals who have been outed in the WikiLeaks revelations. These unintended disclosures underscore the invisible line that exists between public and private speech.

I'm sure former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick had no idea that the 14,000 text messages exchanged between him and his chief of staff, Christine Beatty, would end his career. Not only did the text messages out his affair with Beatty, they also served as the foundation for

a lawsuit that resulted in an \$8.4 million settlement by the City of Detroit. In December 2010, federal prosecutors issued even more charges against Kilpatrick. If convicted of the new charges, which include extortion, bribery, racketeering, and filing false tax returns, Kilpatrick could spend decades in jail.

In today's rapid-fire communications arenas, we not only have got to find ways to turn the volume way down; sometimes it must simply be turned off if we are to avoid having our lives or careers destroyed by a private moment made public or a public moment gone viral through broadcast or posting over a social media site.

Be aware. Be very, very aware. Even if *TMZ* doesn't follow you around! Be ever vigilant about what you do and what you say in the presence of friends, family, colleagues, or unknowns armed with seemingly harmless recording devices. What you may consider personal opinions or private actions can become public indictments that haunt you forever. Realize the importance of the Three D's—Discernment, Discrimination, and "Do Unto Others . . ."

Social media as a permanent tracker of your deeds and misdeeds can make the stepping-stones to success that much more slippery. Be it public or private, at home or at play; for your own sake, remember: You're *always* on.

## From Chapter 7: Remain Dignified Even When You're Justified

### *Outside, Listening In*

As a child growing up in an authoritarian Pentecostal household, I knew that cursing was strictly forbidden. I avoided the use of foul language until my sophomore year at Indiana University. That's when I shared a house with some of Bobby Knight's basketball players, who were just as foulmouthed as their coach. It seemed they couldn't communicate with one another or me, even in jest, without an expletive as a punctuation mark. To get my point across to them in conversation, I found myself imitating their crude language.

The players got a kick out of me—the religious kid from Kokomo—who could debate with the best of them but managed to mangle curse words. Apparently, my cussin' linguistics were way off, and they taunted me until I learned how to swear like a construction worker.

The habit stayed with me long after I left college. Not only did I have a cussin' problem, I also had a temper problem. I could go from zero to 90 in a New York minute, especially after my career started to take off.

Sheryl Flowers was the propulsion behind my takeoff. In 2001 she became my radio producer and the guiding force of my public radio career. When she passed away in 2009, after a courageous two-year battle with breast cancer, a part of my soul went with her.

If you've read about the legendary fights between Don Hewitt, the producer who created *60 Minutes*, and correspondent Mike Wallace, you might have an idea of my relationship with Sheryl. We spent all our time together and, as producers and talent often do, we went back and forth all the time. She'd quit ten times and I'd fired her 12 times. But, at the end of the day, neither of us ever went anywhere. We created, argued, and loved with equal passion and forgiveness.

It was Sheryl who tried to corral my foul mouth. Over and over again she'd say: "Tavis, you're talented, disciplined, dedicated, loyal, and organized, and you don't mess around with

your money. But there's a chink in your armor. The thing that's going to trip you up is all the cursing, screaming, and yelling you do when you get upset."

To no avail, she counseled me about my temper. Sheryl insisted that I had to be more circumspect about my language. One day, she warned, I would curse out the wrong person at the wrong time and wind up paying a heck of a price. Her prediction came true. But I had no idea that Sheryl Flowers would be that "wrong person."

One morning we were in the NPR studio going at it. There was a technical glitch that should have been edited out of a pretaped segment that I kept hearing on-air. It happened one time too many, and I had had it. We were off-air, the studio doors were closed, and I was at my extreme—cursing, flailing my arms, slapping the wall, and pounding the desk—I mean, it was not my finest moment.

Unbeknownst to either of us, an engineer outside the studio could see us through the glass partitions. From his booth, the technician had the ability to turn on the microphone in our studio and record our heated conversation.

I knew nothing about this until the next day. The engineer turned the recorded argument into CDs and passed them all around NPR. One of those CDs made its way to management. I was called on the carpet for mistreating and cursing out an employee. To my rationalizing mind, my explosion was just another series of steps in the Sheryl and Tavis tango that we'd quickly get over. But to NPR management, it was serious enough to involve lawyers and to add a behavioral clause to my contract.

After the dust settled and I had endured the snickers, jabs, and suspect looks from colleagues who heard the tape, I decided to listen for myself.

I knew I had a foul mouth, but I'd never actually heard myself curse. But that day, sitting in the studio with my headphones on, listening to my voice, I was shocked beyond belief. The person who sounded like me was enraged and erratic.

That was it for me, man. I called Sheryl, apologized deeply, and promised to stop cursing. I couldn't promise that the perfectionism that sometimes fuels my anger and disappointment about all things work-related would disappear, but I assured her that she would never, ever hear me curse again.

"Never?" Sheryl's response reminded me of Chris Rock's joke about Tiger Woods' promise to never stray: "Tiger don't say never; just say you gonna do your best!"

Sheryl simply asked that I do my best. Listening to my raging, vulgar voice on that CD set me straight.

It's been seven years, and I've kept my promise.

## From Chapter 9: Loose Lips Can Sink Ships

### *Until It Happens to You*

We're all part of the problem. When we read something negative about someone else online and forward it to our list of friends, contacts, and social networks, we're all guilty. We're all voyeurs, contributing to the cultural instability, societal decay, and the Web-speed ugliness that's infecting America.

To some, it's a small price to pay for the reward of global interactivity. For others, it's much ado about nothing; gossip is part of our DNA. Sociologists say gossiping is a way for people to feel important, bond in social circles, stay in-the-know, and clarify positions. According to a 2010 study by the Social Issues Research Center (SIRC), two-thirds of all conversation is gossip. The study's authors also referenced other research that found gossip accounts for 55 percent of men's conversation time and 67 percent of women's.

It's what we do and who we are. I get it.

We live in a brash, totally indiscriminant culture where venting our spleen in public is fodder for a hit reality show or perhaps ten minutes of fame as an agitated guest on *Jerry Springer* or *Maury* or some other knock-down, beat-down, sensationalized, low-brow TV show.

You can't even stand in a checkout line without being bombarded by headlines on sleazy tabloids gossiping about extramarital or homosexual affairs, celebrity weight gain or loss, or a vulture-type story of a near-death notable.

As fun as it can be for creative types, YouTube can also be used to anonymously but virally slash someone you don't like or desire to humiliate for chuckles. Why not? Millions are tuned in anyway just waiting for that hilariously funny homemade video that makes a fool out of somebody . . . anybody.

The privacy lane has been unbelievably cluttered with postings of opinions as facts and live feeds from bookstores, hotels, hospitals, businesses, and local girls and guys' "gone wild" parties. We function in a society where it's actually cool to hang folks and businesses upside down on the cross via the Internet.

There is no Internet FCC as a constant monitoring and regulatory authority. An offensive video might have had a million hits by the time you realize you've been slandered online. The immediate consequence of an improper or inaccurate video posting is usually a company or a person's ruined reputation.

Again, I get it. But it's shameful.

## From Chapter 11: Living For The City

### *Boo-Boo the Fool*

It was early 1987. After spending Christmas with my family in Indiana, I packed everything I owned—which obviously wasn't much because it all fit into my orange Datsun 280Z two-seater—and hit the road to California.

Mayor Tom Bradley promised me a job after my internship, but he added a caveat: I had to go back to Indiana and finish my studies. I did. And although circumstances (mostly of my own doing) seriously delayed the receipt of my actual diploma, it wasn't going to deter me from accepting the mayor's promise. I had given him a date for my arrival, and I was determined to show up for work in LA on the designated day.

After driving my overloaded Datsun nonstop from Kokomo to LA, I arrived in town eager to start my new job and new life. To my absolute shock and horror, I learned there was no job. The Reagan era was in full swing; the economy was bad; and California was still hemorrhaging from the recession. Mayor Bradley had just announced a citywide hiring freeze, which applied to all city employees except the police, fire, and sanitation departments.

So there I was, all hyped up, gung-ho, and ready to go to work . . . and there's a hiring freeze. If I had known, I could have—perhaps should have—stayed in Indiana and made sure I had finished school properly. But since I didn't know, I wound up stuck in LA without a degree, without money or a job, feeling like Boo-Boo the Fool.

If not for Eula Collins, Mayor Bradley's secretary, there's no telling what would have happened. Eula became a dear friend during my internship the previous year. If I wasn't at work, I was hanging out at Eula's house. She had two daughters but no son. Eula, my LA mother, seemed to enjoy having me around and doting on me. After arriving in town penniless, broken-spirited, and homeless, I gratefully stayed at Eula's house in South Los Angeles.

A couple of weeks later, Eula found an apartment for me, right across the street from her house. As fate would have it, that apartment is right around the corner from my headquarters in Leimert Park today. Fortunately, the apartment was already furnished. The owner had to leave and rented out her one-bedroom apartment complete with sheets, towels, dishes, a television, and a modest amount of furniture.

Now I had a place to stay but no money. Until the hiring freeze lifted, I had to aggressively pursue a "meantime" plan. During my job search, I found myself locked in three uncompromising categories: "overqualified," "underqualified," and "undependable." Managers at McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants said I was woefully overqualified. Without an actual degree, I was underqualified for high-tech and other well-paying jobs.

In retrospect, I may have unintentionally sabotaged myself. In interviews with potential employers, I often talked about interning for Mayor Bradley and how I had a job waiting once the freeze was over. Why *would* anyone hire me? Fast-food places have enough turnover, and any savvy employer would hesitate to invest in someone waiting for the freeze to lift.

I could not find a gig to save my life. I ended up doing anything and everything I could to make a little money, including signing up when movies and TV shows advertised for extras. I made appearances on *Matlock*, *Cheers*, and a couple of other TV shows. I even qualified for a Screen Actors Guild (SAG) card, thanks to a quick cameo in the film *Someone to Watch Over Me* with Tom Berenger and Mimi Rogers. The director wanted a stock boy to ask, "Who's there?" when the killer broke in through a basement window. Out of the hundreds of extras on the set that day, I was chosen. Turns out, my lines were cut from the movie. But, those two words qualified me as a genuine actor. Funny, huh?

The hiring freeze—which lasted more than a year, combined with no consistent income—was getting the best of me. During my internship, I met businessman Harold Patrick, who became a dear friend and supporter. Harold, Eula, a couple of other friends, Mama, and Big Mama—everybody pitched in, sending me a little money to keep me afloat, which made me feel like a horrible failure.

I was barely hanging on, but an eviction notice pushed me over the edge. When my intuitive mother called to ask how things were going, I said, "Mom, I've done everything I can; now I'm being evicted. I can hear Gladys Knight and the Pips warming up. 'LA proved too much for the man, he couldn't make it . . .' It's not going to work."

I was trying to be cute and funny, but holding back the tears was a battle.

"I know you don't want to do this," Mama reassured me, "and I don't want you to feel like a loser or that you failed, but I want you to know that you can always come home."

For some reason, it hadn't occurred to me that I had that option. Accepting my mother's offer, which seemed like the only viable choice, was comforting, but it also meant I had failed. Tears of relief and humiliation flowed equally.

"Mom," I sniffled, "I can't imagine how things can get any worse. I'm going to take you up on your offer. I'll pack my stuff and come home."

That night, my friend Harold pleaded with me to change my mind: "This whole thing could turn around in a week. I really do believe you'll do great things in Los Angeles. I think this is your city, Tavis. Give yourself another week," he urged.

Harold was trying to convince me to be more patient, more tenacious. He had a gut feeling that California was really the best place for my talent. He had no idea that his argument was bouncing up against an eviction notice. The signs were plain as day: *Give it up! Go home!*

"Time's run out, Harold," I said in quiet resignation. It was a Tuesday night; Thursday morning, I planned to head back to Kokomo. Wednesday night, filled with dread, I stepped into the shower. Lathered up, with water pouring from the spigot and my eyes, I experienced my first earthquake. It was a nice little shaker. In that butt-booty-naked moment, slipping and sliding all over the place, I heard a voice:

*As long as you're alive, Tavis, there's hope. It can always get worse. Hold on.*

This may be hard for you to believe, but for me, it was a bona fide revelation. It was a message I not only heard, it was also one I felt, just as real as breathing.

I got out of the shower, surveyed the surroundings—a few dishes broken, furniture in disarray, fallen plaster from the wall—but no major damage. Still, in that moment, when I thought things couldn't get any worse, things miraculously changed. Like flicking a light switch, my tears subsided, and my spirit completed a 180-degree turn.

Before the earthquake, I thought I had endured enough and suffered enough; that eviction notice was a sign to move on. In reality, the earthquake was a stronger sign to stay put. It took an act of nature to shake up my world and toss me around, but afterward, I was still standing, still breathing, and feeling blessed to be worthy of bona fide heavenly assurance to hang in there.

"I'm not going home, not just yet," I whispered to myself with new resolve. "I'm going to hold on a little bit longer."

In what seemed like a lifetime later, looking at the single can of Spaghetti-O's in my cupboard and my last bit of cornflakes in a bowl in front of me, the phone rang.

It was Bill Elkins from City Hall:

"Congratulations, Tavis," he said. "The city-government freeze has been lifted. Consider yourself a paid, full-time employee of Mayor Tom Bradley's staff."

## From Chapter 13: The Diversity Imperative

### *Start Where You Are...*

My love of humanity starts unapologetically with my people because I understand our struggle, which continues to this very day. But on the battlefield of race and class, injustice and exclusion, Black people are not exclusive targets.

It is the memory of Dr. King that encourages me to sound the clarion call for political accountability. Too many conversations revolve around the concerns of the rich and lucky or the so-called middle class. Few talk about the poor, the disenfranchised, or the underprivileged. The “haves” get attention, while the “have-nots” languish out of sight.

Too many Americans keep insisting that we must “take our country back.” They yearn for the “good ol’ days,” forgetting (or ignoring) that those days weren’t so good for red, Black, and brown folk. Others are boiling mad over immigration. It’s a waste of energy. No fence, no wall, no amount of troops along the border will ever dim the constitutional promise of liberty, freedom, and opportunity for all. Let’s face it: No one’s going anywhere!

In 2010, *Forbes* magazine cited U.S. Census figures to make the argument that diversity needs to be a high priority in this country. By the year 2050, racial/ethnic minorities (Latinos at 30 percent, African Americans at 12 percent, and Asian Americans at 8 percent) will comprise 55 percent of America’s working-age population. In a world where China and India are superpowers and the marketplace is global, we need to prepare a cadre of colorful emissaries to help this country remain relevant in the 21st century and beyond.

Dr. King’s operational definition of love means that everyone is worthy—just because. It’s not about titles, wealth, or skin color. LOVE means everyone is worthy—just because.

A similar theme was found in the 2005 editorial, “How the Civil Rights Movement affected U.S. immigration,” published by the Sound Vision Foundation, a nonprofit religious organization dedicated to producing constructive and educational Islamic media content.

Beginning with the familiar words, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” the commentary reads: “Until the 1960s, this famous inscription which is found on the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor—the site where many immigrants arrived in America in the early 20th century—applied only to whites. But thanks to the country’s Civil Rights Movement, among other factors, immigrants of all colors were welcomed into the country.”

This civil rights emphasis on human rights brought world attention to America’s exclusion of all nonwhite immigrants, the commentary stresses. Discriminatory laws that restricted the freedoms of Black people also stifled the ambitions of darker-skinned immigrants, women, Hispanics, Asians, lesbians, gays, and transgendered; they served to choke off basic human rights for all Americans.

## Bio for Tavis Smiley



From his celebrated conversations with world figures, to his work to inspire the next generation of leaders as a broadcaster, author, advocate, and philanthropist, **Tavis Smiley** continues to be an outstanding voice for change. Currently, Smiley hosts the late-night television talk show, *Tavis Smiley* on PBS, *The Tavis Smiley Show* distributed by Public Radio International (PRI); and is a co-host of *Smiley & West* (PRI). He is the first American to simultaneously host signature talk shows on both public television and public radio. In addition to his radio and television work, Smiley has authored 14 books, including his *New York Times* bestselling memoir *What I Know For Sure* and the book he edited, *Covenant with Black America*, which became the first nonfiction book by a Black-owned publisher to reach #1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list. He is also the presenter and creative force behind *America I AM: The African American Imprint*—an unprecedented and award-winning traveling museum exhibition celebrating the extraordinary impact of African American contributions to our nation and to the world. In 2009, *TIME* magazine named him to their list of “The World’s 100 Most Influential People.” This year, 2011, marks his 20th year in broadcasting.