Rev. Sharpton shares his life experiences in ‘Rejected Stone’

The Rev. Al Sharpton, civil rights activist and host of MSNBC’s “PoliticsNation,” claims he is a changed man. He has lost 150 pounds, doesn’t wear a medallion or a sweat suit or press his hair.

Although he continues to lead marches to protest the shooting of Trayvon Martin, stand your ground laws, and restrictions on the right to vote, Sharpton believes he no longer has to be confrontational to get the attention of people in power.

In “The Rejected Stone,” Sharpton draws on his own experiences, from his days as a boy preacher in Brooklyn, New York to his relationships with James Brown, Michael Jackson and Barack Obama, to draw life lessons for leaders.

Each one of us, he preaches, should fight for high purposes and give to those in need. And leaders should be authentic, change and evolve, remain loyal to friends and family, stay focused and disciplined, beware of the danger of extremes, and practice what they preach.

Exercise in self-promoting

Unfortunately Sharpton doesn’t go beneath and beyond these bromides. “The Rejected Stone,” alas, is more an exercise in self-promotion than in soul-searching.

With the notable exception of Sharpton’s endorsement of gay marriage, the book is devoid of political content. Sharpton indicates that he does not agree with everything Minister Louis Farrakhan has said and done, but provides no examples.

He notes that he endorsed Barack Obama over Hillary Clinton, but says nothing about the policy differences between the two candidates.

Sharpton implies that his decision was based on Obama’s decision to contact him directly, even though he mocks those who attack a politician because “he didn’t come by my fish fry.”

‘Tons of mistakes’

Sharpton also has a tendency to simplify and overstate. Michael Riccardi, who tried to kill Sharpton during a march in Bensonhurst in 1991 to protest the murder of Yusuf Hawkins, he writes, was carrying out “what they told him;” he does not identify who “they” were.

There was “nothing strange” about Michael Jackson, he insists. Although the music establishment tried to “break” him, “more than anybody, Michael broke down the racial barriers in music.”

Palestinian and Israeli leaders, he asserts, did not allow their differences to become personal or allow emotion to get in the way of their goals.

Finally, and most distressingly, although he acknowledges that he has made “a ton of mistakes,” Sharpton does not “get real” about his shortcomings. He does not address accusations that he has made anti-Semitic comments.

Pressures and privileges

Sharpton describes, at times movingly, the “hauntingly lonely and complex life” of celebrities, and the
pressures that lead some of them to make "bad moves."

A bit more self-serving, perhaps, is his claim (backed up by the story that he fed the hungry in Harlem before going to James Brown’s funeral) that he understands "the pain of great civil rights leaders trying to do things that are noble but knowing tomorrow’s paper is going to call them opportunists and hustlers, knowing they are really giving much more than they’ll ever get" – because "this role is the one I signed up for."

Because they appreciate his drive and purpose, Sharpton writes, many Americans do not begrudge him "the first class flights and the fancy hotels to which I now have access."

After all, he knows who and what Al Sharpton stands for. And now, for better and worse, so do we.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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