Where Art Thou, Black Dads?

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The absence of committed black fathers in black homes is the root of many of our problems within black communities. More specifically, the absence of my father has been problematic for my family. I am angry and frustrated. I have no father, no husband or man. As a microcosm of the state of black America, my family is dominated by women who are leading dual parenting roles and maintaining households. My family has the challenge of raising boys without the benefit of positive, strong male role models. It is a common issue within black America. The state of black America rests on the state of the black family. We cannot progress nor will we survive if our black men continue to "disappear." Although there appears to be a trend to redefine family, I only know of one that speaks to continuity and black tradition.

The black family is desperate for black men to be present physically and emotionally. It is imperative that our men return home. The drive to emasculate our black men and families must be acknowledged and confronted. When the head is cut off, the body flails. We have managed to flail successfully purely on spirit and tenacity, but eventually the body will drop. Can black men rise to embrace their families despite the conditions of racism and socio-economic injustice aimed to weaken their masculinity and ultimately the state of black America?

The dilemma of today's absent black father must be understood from a historical perspective. The problem is not a new phenomenon but a cleverly crafted construct based on numerous unethical "experiments" that supported America's racist agenda. The precepts of black inferiority as outlined in Higginbotham's *Shades of Freedom* and Willie Lynch's *The Making of a Slave* speak loudly to why many black men and ultimately the black family are struggling. From the onset of the "New World," white superiority was synonymous with the dehumanization of people of color in order to colonize and clear the land (manifest destiny) for the benefit of white privilege. This dehumanization process effectively pitted one person against another by removing the seed from its natural state, and instilling destructive patterns.

Today's crisis of absent black fathers is directly linked to America's historical crafting of black inferiority and white superiority. Colonial White America believed:

> The African Americans themselves must come to realize their wretched status; black youngsters must be "educated" as to their place and limitations. Only then would African Americans lose all just ideas of their natural position. When African Americans

believed in their inferiority, the precept would become both a part
of law and a part of life. (Higginbotham 29)

With the notion of black inferiority firmly implanted in white and black mindsets, (and often touted as scientific fact by "experts" such as Samuel A. Cartwright), transmission into law soon followed. Slaves were not allowed to legally marry as that would have constituted a legal contract between people—slaves were deemed chattel, more likely cattle—who were protected by civil and constitutional rights. Only free blacks, not slaves, were allowed to enter into legal contracts. It would take the Civil Rights Act of 1866 to extend marital rights to all black people. However, before that, as a matter of keeping the peace and "expanding their property," slave owners did allow the custom of jumping the broom. "The wedding vows they recited promised not 'until death do us part' but 'until distance'—or, as one black minister bluntly put it, 'the white man'—'do us part'" (Hunter). This quote reflects the fragile state of black families and their powerlessness to remain together. Black slave codes effectively shut down black people's pursuit of happiness, systematically stripping them of all human rights that allow a person to declare "I am." Their pursuit of happiness was not considered an unalienable right set forth in the United States Declaration of Independence. Black people's happiness or love of family was not a factor in an equation based on profit by breeding black people. Additionally, male slaves were made to impregnate multiple female slaves, and female slaves were kept pregnant thereby producing new slaves. During this breeding process, emotional and familial ties were devalued and degraded.

The advent of the Civil War presented a new twist to the absence of black fathers. Approximately 180,000 black men—free and slave—joined the Union Army to fight or labor in the Civil War. Conversely, there were also black Confederates (count widely ranges from 15,000 to 120,000) who mainly served as laborers but also engaged in combat (Williams). These enlisted Union and Confederate soldiers voluntarily or involuntarily left behind their families with hopes that the end of the war would result in black freedom, equal opportunities, and whole families. To reunite with family and/or begin a new family, these black men fought and served diligently in hopes of securing a brighter future. A poignant scene in *Glory* showcased the pride Rawlins exuded when greeting black children back home. He represented the true character of a black father who stands up to be able to provide for and protect his family. The Rawlins of yesterday and today represent the truth that black men can rise beyond age-old precepts of inferiority to embrace their families.

During the Civil War, black women were not strangers to the absent black man syndrome; it was a way of life. Many black women such as Harriett Tubman did not blink an eye in raising "their" children, using hoes and shotguns to provide and protect, being both mother and father. This forced independence set the stage for strong, black single mothers and village parenting in raising children in black America. Unfortunately, some independent black women have adopted this absence as typical rather than abnormal. We have to challenge black men to be

responsible, to return, stay, and co-head their families. Black women must allow them to do so. Super families trump superwomen.

After the Civil War and during the Reconstruction era, returning black soldiers went back home to reconnect with family and start anew. According to Bennett, "Witnesses said the roads of the South were clogged in 1865, with Black men and women searching for long-lost wives, husbands, children, brothers, and sisters. Some of the searchers were successful, but many families were never reunited" (201).

Old and new families alike picked up the pieces to move forth from familiar grounds to new beginnings in areas near and far. These times represented promise for the black family as black communities emerged offering stability and independence. Black towns such as Rosewood were self-sufficient with skilled labor and professions (doctors, teachers, blacksmiths, bankers, store owners, etc.) and, more importantly, were the epitome of black progress. They characterized the true spirit of the black family when allowed to thrive without interference. "The first fruit of the new legal order was a deepening of the relationships between black men and black women, who legalized marriage ties at mass registrations and ceremonies" (Bennett 290). The Reconstruction era and these towns represented a chance for black fathers to be men in their homes. These symbols of black pride offered additional proof that black men could rise beyond their restrictive environment and head their households with love and pride.

Jim Crow laws and modern-day plights, however, were a terrible setback. Jim Crow laws effectively reversed public black freedom. Segregation of public facilities in the South, the disenfranchisement of southern black America, and the "strange fruit" that hung from southern trees ushered in a new era of terror. However, innovative black families banded together to again showcase their great strengths:

> Southern blacks survived the demeaning character of Jim Crow by organizing self-help associations that functioned as parallel institutions to those in the white community, ranging from lodges and social clubs to life insurance programs and volunteer fire departments. By 1910, a wide range of segregated black institutions in southern communities served as refuges and safe harbors from white terror and violence; these social clubs and lodges enabled a small, middle-class of prosperous black participants to live in dignity and with self-respect. (Davis)

The black progress that burgeoned within the hearts and minds of black people could not be "worn" because fearful white America deemed it a threat. Lynchings became a southern pastime. During 1882-1968, approximately 3,500 black people were lynched, with Mississippi, Georgia, and Texas respectively accounting for the states with the most recorded incidents. This terrorization definitely plagued the psyche of the black family. Black men and women alike did not know if the slightest transgression or none at all could cost them their life and lead to their family being torn apart. This terror still reverberates as countless black families (e.g. Evers, Till, King, Bumpers, Hawkins, Bell, Martin, etc.) move

forward in the wake of tragedy.   Moving forward and away (e.g. Underground Railroad, The Great Migration, Kansas Exodus) is what black people apparently have mastered in order to survive the systematic violations of their human rights.

Unfortunately, the modern black family is still under attack in contemporary ways that were set in motion centuries ago. The machine is so finely tuned that it needs minimal interference from the engineer. The challenge for black families today is moving forward by remembering the past as depicted in *Sankofa*. Black people lead the statistics for most social ills today.   Incarceration, unemployment, black-to-black crime, single-parenting, foster-care children, high-school/college dropouts, etc. are plagues as much as the chains of slavery and the nooses of Jim Crow. Our true heritage demands that we as a people, and black fathers particularly, make a united stand to rise beyond the age-old precepts of inferiority to embrace our families despite the conditions of racism.

Surely an inferior people would not be able to survive, progress, and lay claim to being achievers and trendsetters in every field, industry, and sport today. Black men must embrace their innate greatness for actually flourishing through centuries of mind-boggling physical and psychological abuse. By looking back, black men and women can see what is wrong today. What is wrong is that we are allowing yesterday's false precepts of inferiority to ruin our relationships, families, and communities today. We are not the product of Willie Lynch's *The Making of a Slave*, we are the antithesis, the anomaly, that would not go the way of "The Trail of Tears" walked by Native Americans. Bennett notes a "…desperate need for new interpretations of the formative events in Black history from a Black perspective…in order to mobilize the latent energy in the masses, in order to save them from self-hate and self-destruction…" (201) Powerful, positive black images need to be injected into our psyche. Our ancestors sacrificed and paved the way for us. The black family cannot disintegrate and let their struggle be for naught. The ancestors' stories and images are to be acknowledged and honored. Acknowledgement and acceptance will lead to healing. As poignantly stated by Dr. Youngblood, "the way out is back through." Self-love is the answer to our dilemma. To love ourselves, we must love our history. To love ourselves, we must love our image.   To love ourselves, we must love one another. Loving one another will ultimately save the black family. Understanding our history and the forces against us mitigates my anger and frustration.   I forgive my father because his journey was heroic. He did his best given the cruel realities that engulfed him and our family during Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement. I am living because my father was not inferior. I am a living testament of our history. I have faith our black fathers will return home and usher in the dawn of a new day.

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