



One Person's Testimony:
Rediscovering and reclaiming your voice during
life's most difficult days

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Greetings, and thank you for reading this latest issue of our ongoing analysis and commentary publication, *Perspectives on Our Work*.

I'll share at the outset that writing this essay has been a very different experience for me, compared to the others I have written. This has, by far, been the most difficult essay for me to write. I hope it has even a fraction of the meaning for some of you that it has had for me while writing it.

My testimony

In this essay, I want to reflect on some dynamics I have been experiencing, at least in a more pronounced way, for the last year or more. I am clear that some of my motive for sharing these experiences is probably selfish. I am certainly hoping that writing about these dynamics helps to free my spirit up a bit. But moreso, I hope that reading this essay will help some of you reflect on and perhaps appreciate the need for us to heal ourselves, our families, and to reach out to those individuals we know are struggling... helping to find that peace that we all seek. We are the only ones we've got, so we've got to pull it together.

Cancer

The last year has been extremely challenging for me. I have found myself at so many different extremes of life's emotional spectrum. As many of you know my brother, Khari Miller, has been battling cancer for almost nine years. He was diagnosed with Hodgkins

Lymphoma in March of 2000. He has fought valiantly and continues to fight the good fight. The cancer is still present, and continues to spread, but slow enough for Khari to keep living a life of passion, meaning and purpose. I know it's been extremely difficult for him; and I also know it's been difficult for others close to him, including myself.

Doctors have called Khari a walking and living miracle, precisely because of how extensively the cancer had spread throughout his body by the time he was diagnosed. The first oncologists that took his case gave him a maximum six months to live, even with the initial advanced chemotherapy and radiation treatments they were prescribing. Within the last eight years he's been through multiple regimens of chemotherapy and radiation treatments and several experimental cancer treatments. He has also undergone two bone marrow / stem cell transplants, for which I had the honor of being the donor. I am so thankful that he is still with us, and continues to press on.

Relatively recently, I found out that two other individuals that I am close to were diagnosed with cancer. In early 2008 my father was diagnosed with early stages of prostate cancer. After several months of consultation with multiple doctors and a number of prostate cancer survivors, as well as months of careful research and consideration, my father decided to undergo a newly developed laser surgery to have the

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cancer removed. I am so thankful to report that the surgery was very successful. As far as we know, this was by far a best case scenario for dad and the family.

Also last spring another very close friend and colleague was diagnosed with a challenging case of breast cancer. This past summer she underwent a pair of surgeries, and now continues to undergo regular chemotherapy treatments. She is hanging in there as well, but it continues to be very challenging.

While each of these individuals is very close to my heart, it's been difficult being completely responsive to each of them and their respective challenges with an open and prayerful heart.

Closer to Home

During this same time period my relationship with another individual, who has certainly been closest to my heart for the past almost ten years, has unraveled at the seams, seemingly at record speed. This particular experience, which really escalated last spring, has been most difficult to cope with and make sense of.

I always thought I was at peace with, or at least in control of, my emotions and reflections on my foster care and adoption experience. I can say very clearly now that this recent and still unfolding experience has evoked some of the most painful and frightening feelings of rejection and abandonment that I have ever been forced to deal with. This experience has exposed many feelings and emotions I honestly never knew existed within me. This experience has touched the core of who I am, spiritually and emotionally, and has challenged many of my assumptions about relationships, marriage and family.

During the last nine months I have experienced pretty concerning night sweats and other body temperature fluctuations, heaviest during the summer and early fall. I simultaneously lost approximately 15-20 pounds. It's been a rough period, with many highs and lows, moments of hope and despair, as well as some periods of extreme anger, resentment and frustration. Fortunately, I can now see a light of hope and healing off in the distance, and I continue to work through this experience anxiously and prayerfully.

Why am I sharing this?

Now why am I sharing all of this, and particularly in this format? Like I said earlier I am sure some of this is selfish. Writing is a healing exercise for me. Writing is my outlet for personal reflection and expression. Just writing about some of these experiences and

dynamics helps me feel better... just getting it off my chest. Acknowledging the pain is liberating.

Moreover, I grew up within the Black church tradition. A big part of that tradition is expressiveness, evidenced in the tradition of testifying. Testifying serves many different purposes. Sometimes we testify because we know what we've been through, and we just want to give thanks to the Creator for guiding us through it. Sometimes we testify because what we are going through still hurts, and we just need to acknowledge it so that we can work through it.

I recognize that the totality of my recent experiences has pushed me way past my old comfort zone and has forced me to deal with things that are so painful... fear of being alone, rejection, abandonment and loss; a rigidity in my core values and sensibilities; and very sharp perspectives on the importance of family, relationships and marriage. I wanted to reflect openly on at least some of this, so that maybe even just one other person can benefit from my experience and perhaps find a more peaceful and healing space to live in. This is exactly what I am trying to do right now.

Being Open to Possibilities

For much of my adult life I have frowned on the typical American approach toward therapy and counseling in this "not well" society of ours. I always frowned on it as being culturally out of sync and detached. For the most part I still fundamentally believe that is true about the field. In the last several months, however, I have actually opened myself up to the possible benefits of seeing a counselor. It's been a productive experience so far. I was afraid for the longest time because all of the people that I knew (among my peers) that had undergone marriage counseling had ended up in a personal space and place that I was afraid of being in. But I was desperate to talk with someone and wanted affirmation that I wasn't going crazy in my reactions to some of the dynamics I was struggling to make sense of.

I'm still very much in the midst of it, but I want to acknowledge that I was a little off base in my assessment. Counseling is certainly not *the answer* to the problems we face, but it can be a powerful resource and process for helping us make sense of what we are experiencing. Indeed I still believe the counselor needs to be culturally in sync with you, but if that is the case it can be a powerful experience. It has been and continues to be for me. It really has helped me

make sense of my current circumstances, and it has also pushed me to work on and work through some understandable yet still unhealthy aspects of my personality.

I have also come to appreciate some other things as of late. The first is the important reminder that I have been and continue to be blessed beyond measure... "blessed and highly favored" as we tend to say.

I have certainly been directly affected by the experiences of my close friends and family members battling cancer. I am also clear that I am not the one that has to endure the difficult physical challenges presented by surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Sure it hurts personally to see loved ones struggling against illnesses as serious as these, but the battle they experience is very different. When it's all said and done, however, all of us share a mutual responsibility to be a support and healing resource for one another along this journey. And let's be clear that we cannot help others if we are not at least half-way well ourselves. Compassion, with a deep appreciation of the challenges, pain and suffering of other people, can help free us up to experience our own healing. But we have to be present enough to focus on others and not just our own challenges, pain and suffering.

In talking with some of my closest friends I have come to appreciate that when we are struggling through depression or some other life challenges, we are not the only ones affected. As I have tried to work through these challenges in recent months, I have hurt others that are close to me. My style is to retreat and close myself off to others when things get hard. I can even lash out at others that try to get close enough to help. That only creates more pain and hurt for the very people that are closest to us and care about us. It also disconnects us from the real healing work and relationships we have been put in this world to nurture and develop. I am more clear now that the only way we can get through some of our "stuff" is to deal with it straight up and out in the open. To work through it with the very people that are closest to us and care most about us is critical.

What does this all mean?

Now let me tie this together in some kind of coherent way. As I mentioned, writing this essay has been a bit more challenging for me than usual. I also realize that what I am sharing in this essay accounts for why I haven't even written an essay in over a year. It ex-

plains why I have only half-heartedly pursued those relationships, ideas, activities and life goals that are most fulfilling for me. It explains why I haven't given more of myself to the individuals closest to me.

This, brothers and sisters, isn't truly living. Unfortunately, however, this is the way many of us walk along life's path. No longer will this be my story. I appreciate now, more than ever, that my children deserve to see their father live life with the passion, enthusiasm, courage, and determination that the Creator has blessed me with. I have to be the example they came into this world to learn from. I have my family and my closest friends to thank for helping me realize and appreciate this.

Deep depression and the pain and stress of dealing with life's profound challenges can be paralyzing if we aren't careful. That has been my reality for the last year directly, and for a number of years more generally. I am clear about it now, however. I hope some of these reflections will help me, as well as some of you, or others you are close to, think more reflectively about how to respond to these kinds of life dynamics.

African American Men and Fathers

I don't know many (or any) African American men that are fully open and honest about their feelings, fears insecurities and personal struggles. I have seen too many of us suffer as a result. I have seen both directly and indirectly the painful and costly impact of suicide, unnatural disease, premature death, depression, rage, anger and frustration on our families and our community. Contrary to popular perceptions presented in the media or in the "professional literature," I believe so much of this comes not from a lack of care, concern, compassion and love for our families and community, but precisely an inability to show that care, concern, compassion and love in ways that feel welcomed and affirming.

I would like to add my voice to the chorus of African American men and women, past and present, that have cried out for African American men to wake up and reconnect with who we truly are. We have a lot to say, a lot of stories to tell, and a lot of work to do. We have to find healthy and consistent strategies for opening up and giving of ourselves... ways that may be different from what we are used to but still productive, even when painful in the moment. I can tell you, though, that we *can* get through it. We have to get through it. Our families and communities are depend-

ing on us. We must do better. I know firsthand, as do many of you, what some of the challenges are. I also know firsthand, as do many of you, what some of the possibilities are. African American fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, cousins, uncles and grandfathers we have to get it together.

African American mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, cousins, aunts and grandmothers please find ways to open up the space and place in your hearts for African American men to be what is healthy and natural and necessary. Those of you who are able, teach other young girls and ladies how to do the same. We must continue to learn with and from one another. We are complimentary, and can only do this together. Indeed, there are some relationships that might not work in the immediate sense, but we must still be respectful, loving and compassionate as we create a healthy, life affirming and healing space within which we can interact... and our children can develop.

Our Charge

We have to want a healthy and whole community as badly as our ancestors did. Indeed, we've got a lot of work to do. But we can do it, and we can do it in our lifetime. From this moment forward, I ask that you also reflect on what it means to be well, to be present and to be compassionate. Develop strategies in your own life to make this a reality. Reclaim your voice as you continue to walk along life's path. Speak with courage and conviction, and most importantly through your conduct and your example.

We are our only saviors. We are the legacy of our ancestors. We are the examples for our children. We are the hope of our future generations... our children yet unborn. It's healing time! *OAM*

The author of this essay, Oronde A. Miller, is the founder and executive director of The Institute for Family and Child Well-Being. Please share any comments and reflections via email at omiller@ifcwb.org.

Note to Our Readers: *One reason we publish this essay series, Perspectives on Our Work, is to encourage the broader community to participate in an ongoing national dialogue about the major challenges facing African American families and communities, especially those challenges related to the African American experience with this nation's child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Please share your reflections on this and other essays with us via email at the address provided above. If you are interested, we will consider posting your comments and reflections on our website. You can also visit the IFCWB Blog at <http://www.ifcwb.blogspot.com>. Please join this national dialogue about our families and children... about our future. We thank you for your continued support of this most important work.*

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