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A Celebration of African American Fathers!

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Greetings, and thank you for reading this issue of our ongoing analysis and commentary publication.

In this issue I would like to celebrate the significance of African American fathers and their immeasurable contribution to the history and continued development of African American families. I will do so in a very personal way by reflecting, in the form of a letter, on my relationship with my father.

As was the case with my celebration of mothers, this essay is also a difficult one to write, as these reflections are very personal. After experiencing the last six years of fatherhood, I am clear that African American fathers are likely among the most misrepresented and misunderstood groups of people. *But still we rise!*

Dear Dad, there are few public representations of African American fathers that shed light on the strength and integrity of our experience. Most of the depictions that claim to capture the personal side of fathers only talk about our pains, missteps and tribulations, and how we struggle just to stay alive and find meaning in life. Well there is another story that needs to be told. I would like to reflect on the tremendous passion, courage and sacrifice that so many African American fathers make every day to ensure that our children, families and communities are well. This is a reflection on men like you.

This essay can't undo all of the craziness people say about African American fathers, but it is a way for me to say thank you and celebrate all that you have meant to me. As with my recent reflections about mom, there are likewise many reasons for me to thank you for being a great father.

I am deeply appreciative of the discipline you helped to instill in Khari and me. You always insisted

that we listen to and show respect for mom, other adults and our elders. These values and rules were non-negotiable. You made it clear that our behavior didn't only reflect on us as individuals, but also our family and community, including the rich, proud legacy of our ancestors.

I have to tell you that of all our friends you were always viewed as one of the strictest fathers. Physically you have always had a commanding presence and you had minimal tolerance for nonsense when it came to us and our friends as we were growing up. I realize now that one big reason for that was that the stakes were (and continue to be) too high for African American youth getting caught up in otherwise typical adolescent nonsense.

While you were strict and quick to discipline us for

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getting into trouble, you have always been a very fun and affectionate father as well. I remember those many nights you came home after

we were in bed, came into the bedroom, closed the door quietly behind you, and scared the mess out of us by making strange noises. Then you'd start tickling us and wrestling with us until we were either too tired or started crying from laughter. You would then tuck us back in and kiss us goodnight. Those were great days.

You also made sure we did recreational and other fun activities together as a family, including tennis, swimming, badminton, pizza nights and other family outings and vacations.

On the serious side, I remain thankful for the effort you made to expose me as an adolescent to some of the service activities of the Detroit Alumni Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. It was my involvement with the Detroit Kappa League that showed me

the real potential of African American social and civic organizations, *when they are committed to ideals higher themselves*. The African American men I was exposed to through this experience demonstrated the values of sacrifice, discipline, hard work, education, service and achievement. More importantly, however, these men were not committed to a selfish kind of individual and personal achievement, but made it clear that even our personal goals must be in support of our families, the larger community and unequivocally in support of the continued healing and development of the African American community.

I am equally thankful for the examples of fatherhood found in my other cousins, uncles and extended family growing up. You all have been devoted fathers, protecting us as best you could from the madness in the streets, and ensuring that we followed a path to success and self-sufficiency for ourselves and now our families.

Dad, I frequently find myself thinking about the crisis state of affairs facing African American youth. I find myself reflecting on the climate growing up in 1970's and 1980's Detroit. This was the period that teenage gun violence started to skyrocket to unprecedented and senseless levels.

It is with this in mind that I appreciate all of the lectures and other steps you and mom took to keep Khari and me from getting too caught up in that pathology. I appreciate and respect the way you intervened to de-escalate that petty neighborhood beef when we were in high school. You got us and another family to sit down and talk through the senseless drama that could very easily have resulted in more Black teenage gun violence. I can appreciate that in all of your years as a middle and high school guidance counselor and principal in the Detroit Public Schools, you have seen your share of what that pathology has produced, and the pain and heartbreak it has inflicted on families.

I remember when you sat me down in the family

room and shared with me some of your observations of the American political and criminal justice systems, especially as they relate to African American families. Your message was neither one exclusively about "personal responsibility" nor one exclusively about "blaming the system." Instead your message was about critical observation, critical study, and critical reflection, as well as our responsibility to be socially and politically aware and engaged. Through your words and your example, you demonstrated what it means to be actively engaged, and to work with integrity in the interests of African American families and communities.

There's another big lesson you taught me. I can't remember what I was struggling with, but you shared with me that the most difficult aspect of any decision is actually making it. You went on to share the importance of weighing your options, and then moving forward with the option that feels most comfortable. You told me to put fear aside and don't get stuck thinking about all of the "what ifs." You said that even when the decision is wrong, you can at least try to correct it and move on. But you have to actually get through the decision to have that opportunity.

I have come to appreciate that even when we exercise poor judgment and/or make unwise decisions, the great thing is that we frequently have time and are given opportunities to work through the consequences. It might take some time, but that's the beauty of life... our experiences produce opportunities for learning and growth. I appreciate your lessons and your example.

Dad, you and mom have blessed Khari and me in immeasurable ways. Your example of how to live life through the easy times and the difficult times has been priceless. If I can build on the example the two of you have provided, I am confident that I will also be a great father like you! *Thank you again, and I Love You! - OAM*

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