

In Praise Of Black Fathers

Written by Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson ID43
Friday, 24 September 2004 05:47 -

I think the biggest problem is how society looks at Black men and how Black men look at themselves.

"Ain't I a woman too?" In 1853 Abolitionist leader Sojourner Truth asked this question. She knew that the American society did not regard a Black woman as a woman. The question could be easily asked today by Black fathers. "Ain't I a father too"?

Just as America pretended that Black women did not exist, it has done the same with Black fathers. Browse through any bookstore and count how many books there are on Black fathers. I did. There were none. In the growing number of books on fathering, there were no specific references to the problems of Black fathers. Yet, in those same books there were chapters on "single fathers," "gay fathers," "teen fathers," "step fathers," "adoptive fathers," "new fathers," and "old fathers." In the books on fatherhood, dozens of organizations, support groups, and councils for fathers were mentioned. There were none for Black fathers. The books listed a variety of tapes, videos, films, magazines as well as news and feature articles on the problems of fathers. Only a handful concerned Black men. None focused on Black men as fathers.

Even Black publications such as Essence, Ebony, and Jet have published articles only occasionally on Black fathers. And the books by Black writers are mostly recounts of personal remembrances of their fathers. I was hardly surprised by this. American society wrapped its tight cloak of invisibility around Black fatherhood during slavery. At that time wives were separated from their husbands. Children were brutally torn from their fathers and sold. Most slavemasters considered marriage a nuisance and they discouraged it. If that was true, then how could Black families be families? How could Black fathers be fathers? Yet in spite of history, many were.

No heroic sagas or tales were written about these men. No tributes were paid to them. So the myth grew that they did not exist. But they did. Black fathers had families. And they cared about them. Black fathers took great risks and made sacrifices to free their wives and children from bondage. Some physically rescued them. Others bought them. They were driven by a sense of loyalty and love. They were desperate to fulfill their responsibilities as fathers.

Following emancipation, they made their marriages legal. So many that in one North Carolina county a former slave woman complained: "Everybody's getting married and my old man can't get the money." It was that way for decades after slavery. In Harlem in 1925, more than six out of seven Black homes had two parents. In 1960, more than 80 percent of Blacks were married and living together. And then came sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In 1965, he investigated the Black family and called it "a tangle of pathology." Why? Because there were too few fathers in the home.

The Black father became the perfect foil for America's neglect of the Black poor. If Blacks were destitute, it was because Black men deserted the home. If Blacks committed crime, it was because Black men were ignorant and irresponsible. If Blacks took drugs and were abusive, it was because Black men had no sense of self-worth. If they failed it was their own fault.

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Many Blacks challenged Moynihan. They accused him of juggling figures, using faulty research methods and of ignoring the three out of four Black men that were not absent fathers. But Moynihan prevailed. Black fathers were now officially labeled "derelict."

Often myths become reality. The reality for many Black families is that Black men do desert their homes. They make babies that they don't take care of. They fill the jails and prisons. They join gangs and commit acts of violence. They die young from drugs, alcohol, and disease. From conception to adulthood they are forced to run the gauntlet of American abuses.

That's part of the story. Many Black fathers do stay in the home. They sacrifice to provide the necessities for their wives and children. They overcome mountainous obstacles to build strong relationships with their loved ones. They roll up their sleeves, put their chin to the grindstone and go forward. Black fathers want their sons to smile into the camera on the sidelines of football games, wave and say, "hi dad." They are men like my father who, as he nears the ninth decade of his life, looked me in the eye and said, "My children have been my life, never forget that." I didn't.

My father stood on the firm foundation of history and tradition. He drew strength from Black leaders like Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, A. Phillip Randolph, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Elijah Muhammad. Their contributions have enriched not only the Black experience, but America's social tapestry. They were fathers who never lost sight of the importance of family.

In *Black Fatherhood : The Guide to Male Parenting*, I talked with fathers who enriched their families. The men I interviewed span several generations. They have different incomes and occupations. They are married, separated, and divorced. They raise their children alone. They know the joy and pain of relationships. They experience poverty and prosperity. They face discrimination. They confront violence, gangs, drugs and sexual risks. They make hard choices about their children's education, health and welfare. They tell how they are bringing their families through the challenge of American problems.

It is critically important in these difficult days for Black families to have stories that do not talk about defeatism and despair, but about optimism and hope, and most of all about success. We must finally lift the cloak of invisibility from Black fathers.

- Adapted from the Family Digest article, "In Praise of Black Fathers" by Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson. Subscribe to Family Digest Magazine Today!

Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson is Family Digest Media Group's commentator on issues concerning fatherhood. Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of *Black Fatherhood: The Guide to Male Parenting*, and *The Crisis in Black and Black*. Dr. Hutchinson will try to answer all of your questions in Family Digest magazine, Family Digest BABY magazine, or online in this space. Please send Dr. Hutchinson any questions or comments you have about Black Fathers.

Email now at drhutchinson@familydigest.com

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