

Spring 1997

## Ode to Black Men: Be the Light In the Corner

Merlin R. Langley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Langley, Merlin R. (1997) "Ode to Black Men: Be the Light In the Corner," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol1/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lesley.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lesley.edu).

# Ode to Black Men: Be the Light In the Corner

Merlin R. Langley

As a psychologist I was trained to understand that perspective is everything. I also learned and over time came to understand that people are compelled to share their perspective through the telling of stories. Stories seem to provide the connection between the facts of their lives. That is, the telling of stories seem to contribute to their sense of wholeness or integrity.

When I sit with an individual in the stillness of the therapy hour, I am there to help the individual put his or her life in a meaningful context by helping him or her to tell me the best story he or she can. I have decided to change my role as a trained and skilled listener and instead tell you a story. A story that will provide you with a rare glimpse of an increasingly common and shared perspective by many Black men of their present status and future in America. In other words, I challenge you to become the listener and discover the meaning and value of this story.

## The Story

Several of my female friends and friends of my wife constantly ask me "what's up with the brothers?" I believe that they ask me the above question because I am their friend who also happens to be a psychologist whose clinical practice primarily involves working with Black men and their families.

I also believe that my friends ask me the above intriguing question because they are attempting to achieve through dialogue with me a "deeper" understanding of the origin of the sad and the deteriorating state of the Black male-female relationships. In particular, my female friends seem to be concerned and confused about the nature and quality of their relationships with Black men. Concerned because they really do care about Black men. Confused because they do not understand why many Black men display a lack of willingness to make an emotional commitment to them. Additionally some of my female friends are also angry because they feel helpless and increasingly hopeless about finding a Black man to share their lives with.

Over the past decade several Black social scientists has painstakingly described in the literature this change in the social structure of Black male - female relationships. However, it has been only within the last couple of years that this social anomaly has emerged as an integral part of the dominant discourse at cocktail parties and family gatherings all over Black America. This social phenomena has happened largely as a result of the work of Terry McMillian in her award winning book and her recently released movie entitled "Waiting to Exhale".

As a Black man, husband, and father I was also troubled that some Black men tended to avoid (consciously or unconsciously) involvement in committed relationships with Black women. As a result, I contacted some of my colleagues and informed them that I would be interested in taking referrals for an all Black male support group. I told them that I was interested in learning from Black men directly their perspective on the nature of their relationships and their relationship difficulties. Specifically, I was interested in understanding the factors that contributed to some Black males difficulty in initiating and maintaining caring and loving relationships with Black people in general (parents, siblings, wives, children) and Black women in particular. I was at the most cautiously optimistic and at the worst guarded that I would get any referrals. Why? Because I was aware from training and experience that Black clients who are referred for any form of counseling typically do not show up and if they do over 50% do not return after the first interview. Not very good odds.

Four weeks later to my surprise I was sitting with a group of Black men representing diverse social, educational, economic and political backgrounds. During the early phase of the group many of the men appeared guarded and surprised. Guarded because I had asked them to violate a major taboo in male culture: to talk about feelings. Surprised because I was willing to listen to them. Most revealing were their statements that they had gotten used to being at best ignored or at worst feared by both Whites and Blacks in society. Simply, as Black men they were aware that they are not heard or seen in this society. They were invisible because they were not valued. But I realized as I listened to their sad and painful stories that what was even more destructive to their sense of self and their soul was that they had gotten used to being invisible in American society.

The men from poor working class backgrounds described in graphic detail how they were reminded daily of their marginal status by Whites and to our collective shame and detriment, by Blacks as well. With respect to Whites, some men in the group described how their education under conditions of cultural oppression and institutionalized racism had not adequately prepared them to be productive members of society. They described how stagnant or declining wages, the loss of jobs and the growing chasm between rich and poor had contributed to their sense of alienation and isolation from their families and communities. They believed that these factors contributed to Black women not seeing them as potential mates. Some men were courageous to report that at times they wondered and yes doubted whether they could fulfill the role of husband and father as well. Although they were fully aware that race and gender matter in American society, that their socioeconomic options were limited, they experienced shame and guilt. They felt ashamed because they believed that their marginal economic status did not make them appear like men in Black women eyes. Guilty because they felt that they had done something wrong. That they had failed to live up to the expectations of their families and communities.

In contrast, professional men in the group stated that although they believed that their education had benefited them, they continued to experience institutionalized racism and discrimination due to the color of their skin. They described the impact of downsizing, restructuring and reengineering on their ability to not only survive but to thrive in corporate America. For example, one member of the group stated that he "had not reached a glass ceiling with respect to his career. Rather, he had hit a brick wall." Other members described the high price they had paid to be "successful." For them to "make it" it was not a question of integration but of assimilation into mainstream American society. They believed and felt that they could not afford to be Black. As a result they became invisible. They also became very depressed and angry. This should not be surprising to relatively conscious Blacks and Whites in America. Race matters in America, as author Cornel West has so eloquently stated.

In addition, the recent work of Williams Julius Wilson, a Harvard sociologist has helped us to understand the important and defining role that work plays in the life of an individual regardless of his/her race. In a recent New York Times Magazine excerpt of his work entitled When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor Dr. Wilson stated:

"where jobs are scarce, many people eventually lose their feeling of connectedness to work in the formal economy; they no longer expect work to be regular, and regulating force in their lives...in the absence of regular employment, life, including family life, becomes less coherent."

Although Dr. Wilson's work focused primarily on what happens to the poor when work disappears I think his findings have significant mental health and policy implications for professionals as well. I have observed that many individuals regardless of their socioeconomic background tend to experience significant intrapersonal and interpersonal social disorganization as a result of their uncertainty about whether work will disappear for them in the near future as well.

In addition to the absence or uncertainty about the world of work the Black men in this group described how the absence of their parents in general and their fathers in particular during their childhood and adolescence had negatively affected their identity. The unavailability of their fathers as a function of consequences not choice negatively their self concepts and self-esteem. For instance, one group member with tears in his eyes and rage in his voice described how he felt that his father had emotionally neglected and abandoned him and as a result had failed to properly prepare him to cope with the challenges of life as a Black male in White America. As a psychologist, I am fully aware that the above experience may not be unique to Black men. Nevertheless, the absent of a loving and strong Black family in general and a Black father figure in particular is negatively affecting an increasing number of Black boys and girls. Resulting in many Black men and women as adults experiencing problems being able to form committed

relationships, creating and maintaining stable families, and strong communities.

In addition, some men felt that over the last two decades, as a result of major structural changes occurring in the economy (poor education, loss of jobs, migration of middle income families to the suburbs, drugs and violence), the Black community, as an extension of the Black family, did not provide them with the vitally necessary knowledge, guidance, support or role models to learn how to become faithful husbands, loving and responsible fathers, and productive members of society.

I have come to appreciate and understand that as a result of the many negative sociocultural factors described above that many Black men as adults tend to use their relationships with Black women as the context to resolve historical and socially constructed emotional and behavioral problems in living. Problems that are intimately associated with their individual and collective struggle to increasingly feel in control and to feel valued and loved.

The Black man is in trouble. What can be done and who should do it? Although I believe that the support group provided a necessary and supportive community to help the men begin to understand and to change their identity and their behavior, it was not sufficient. What is required? We must remember that it is important to see the struggle of Black men and their families within a historical and sociological perspective. Black men and women must begin to understand the role of the federal government, education and the community in our struggle for racial and economic equality. Black men and women must support affirmative actions measures until America gets the work, race, and the fairness issues right. What John Kenneth Galbraith, a Harvard economist, calls the "The Great Society." The Million Man march in many respects was a cry from Black men. Black men saying I want to do the right thing: I want to work, I do not want my race to be an obstacle for upward mobility, and I want to be treated fairly when times are economically good and when times are economically bad.

Black males need to create organizations or other social mechanisms to develop leaders for the Black community. They desperately need a place where they can get together as men to discuss social and economic policy as it relates to their group interests. In other words, to look at ways to develop our community but to also secure a more independent position economically in America. This is nothing new. As I go across the country I see other ethnic groups engaging in such economic activity sometimes even in our community. Black men need to rebuild what Dr. Courtland Lee, a Black psychologist, calls the triangle of support: strengthen families, strengthen schools and strength institutions (church). Black men and women need to create a public space where they can examine the nature and quality of their relationships. To develop plans for the success of the next generation of our Black youth. To create and develop mentoring programs to expose Black boys and girls to positive role models.

Black men and women must begin to understand the structural relationship between work

and the creation and maintenance of a stable family and community. In other words, when work disappears many times so do fathers. They must understand the responsibility of both the Black family and community as cultural institutions to provide its members with a sense of their personal and collective identity. Black men and women must develop an unequivocal commitment to develop our children for the 21st century. The Black church must reexamine its historical mission within the global community because it has lost its way and as such can not fulfill its role as a cultural institution that provides direction and comfort to the human soul.

Recently my wife and I returned from a trip to South Africa. There were two important lessons that I learned and would like to share with Blacks in America. The power of beliefs and rituals.

Allow me to digress for a moment through the use of a story to illustrate my point:

I was walking along the Indian ocean and I met a brother from Johannesburg, South Africa and we started talking about what life was like before and after the elections in 1994. He said: "you know why the movement against apartheid started in Soweto? Because in Soweto people were reared to always believe that they must be the light in the corner." He explained that "when things seem desperate you must, by your example (behavior), be the light in the corner that provides others with hope that tomorrow will be better than today even though there is no real reason to be optimistic."

The other lesson was the power of rituals. Every significant event in South African society begins with a grand ritual (story telling, song, music, and dance) as a means of denoting that something or somebody is being transformed. Being changed. Being changed for the better. Blacks in America should develop rites of passage programs for Black youth to instill a sense of connection to and responsibility for their family and community.

## References

- Boyd, H., & Allen, R.L., (1996). *Brotherman: The odyssey of Black men in America - An anthology*. One World: Ballantine Books.
- Cose, E. (1993). *The rage of a privileged class*. Harper Collins.
- Galbraith, J.K. (1996). *The good society: The humane agenda*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin
- Langley, M.R. (1994, April). Effects of cultural/racial identity, cultural commitment and counseling approach on African-American males perceptions of therapists' credibility and utility: Summary. *The Psych Discourse*, 25, 7 - 9.
- Langley, M.R. (1994, Winter). *Invisibility blues*. *Lesley Magazine*, 18 - 19.

- Langley, M.R. (1994). Psychotherapy approaches with African-Americans: a historical perspective. *Proceedings of the First Annual Symposium for Mental health Professionals of Color* (pp. 171-214). Boston, MA: Massachusetts Department of Mental Health.
- Langley, M.R. (1993). The cool pose. An Afrocentric Analysis. In R.G. Majors & J.U Gordon (Eds.). *The American Black male: His present status and future*. Chicago: Nelson Hall.
- Lee, C. C., (1992). *Empowering young black males*. ERIC/CAPS McMillan, T. (1992). *Waiting to exhale*. New York: Viking Penguin. West. C. (1993). *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Wilson, W.J. (1996). *When work disappears: The world of the new urban poor*. Random House