

Standing on somebody's shoulders

Written by BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Ph.D., L.P.
Friday, 24 February 2012 14:00



I was born during the era of Jim Crow, where there were toilets for Blacks and Whites. I remember being a little girl in our small Texas town of Floydada (where rumor has it that a man named Floyd and his wife named Ada created the town). In that small rural community, it seemed that the sense of unity and respect went only so far. For example, African Americans lived “across the tracks” and the train separated those of us with dark skin from those whose skin was white. The whistle of the train and crossing the tracks were bleak reminders of the numerous socio-cultural barriers that served as barricades to our dreams and our equality as human beings.

One day, I recall our town celebrating “*Old Settlers Day*” when people like Floyd and Ada were recognized for their contributions to the township. During this festive period, everyone was invited to go Downtown and experience the happenings at the City Hall/Town Square. As a little girl, I remember seeing toilets that said “colored” and I thought to myself: “

Wow what a special day---they even have toilets that are colored!

” I asked my mother if I could go to the “colored” bathroom expecting to find commodes in hues of blue, pink, green, purple, and orange! I was so disappointed when I saw that the toilets were white. I recall telling my mother: “

Those people lied, those toilets were not colored,—they were white just like at home!

” My mother replied, “

BraVada, they are not talking about the toilets, they are talking about you.

”

With only the innocence that a child could have, I could not grasp what she was saying. I then saw a water fountain. One side read “colored” and the other side read “white.” In my cognitive schema, I realized that while I had not seen multi-colored commodes in my day, I had seen (and drank) a whole lot of “colored” water called *Kool-Aid*! So, I immediately started my trek towards the fountain. On my way there, I noticed a little white girl who was obviously thinking the same thing. She was just about to turn the sprocket on the “colored” water fountain when her mother grabbed her by the arm and yelled disapprovingly: “

You can not drink from the colored water fountain

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.” The little girl cried, and with tears streaming down her face, she screamed and repeatedly yelled: But, I want the COLORED water! Then, I knew it must be GOOD (*because your parents never want you to enjoy something sweet and good like Kool-Aid*). That moment was when I turned the sprocket on the “colored” water fountain only to discover that it too was clear just like at home. I felt a visceral pain reverberate throughout my body. I was seven years old and I was deeply wounded. What was wrong with ME, I thought, that a white girl could not drink from the same fountain as I? Later, I recall noticing that something was wrong with being black in our society. Angel’s food cake was

white

, but Devil’s food cake was

dark

. Magic was fine unless it was “

black magic

.” Mail was okay unless it was “

black mail

” and even a lie became all right if it was a “

white lie.

” Only many years later did I discover the deeper meaning of the psychological truth of that experience which was that both the little white girl and I were injured. I have since realized that when any child goes to a “colored” water fountain...there should be colored water in it! Now because of experiences such as that one, both she and I have to seek to actively recover from the saturation of pro-racist beliefs, policies and practices that create a white racial frame of superiority in our society.

Black history month reminds me of that day and the many shoulders on which I stand. It reminds me that I have carried the baton of recovery from racism most of my life, and that the load continues to be burdensome because of the ongoing course of pervasive, insidious onslaughts of racially oppressive policies, practices and beliefs.

Daily I am challenged to re-examine the micro-aggressions that constantly tell me that I do not belong to America and that America does not love me. On a daily basis, I still face oppression when I am reminded that as a Black woman, I should feel ashamed about my body, my hair, my hips, my lips, and my thighs. Daily, I am poised to coil against those who perceive me and my sisters as “welfare queens” and my brothers as “oversexed brutes.” Almost hourly, I face systems that force me to wonder if my black brothers do not find me as intelligent, desirable, worthy, precious or beautiful as my white sisters.

I am constantly reminded that we live in a society where slavery and religion were inextricably meshed to such a degree that male slave owners (who bought, sold, and bedded us) could with all sincerity claim that they loved the Lord and that they were justified by the blood of Jesus! Now, I am still threatened with the reality that even today we live in a society where a subgroup of mostly white men (and some brain-washed women) claim that they love the Lord and are justified by the blood of Jesus when they force me to relinquish submissive control of my body (and yes, my womb)--implying that some of us who are low-income, Black women are too stupid or morally inept to make decisions for ourselves and therefore, we must be subjected to legislative enforcement of policies that determine our fertility.

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During Black history month, many of us are reminded that we have a legacy of greatness that has surpassed multiple exposures to systemic oppression and abuse. We are proud of our Blackness and our heritage; but it saddens me to think that your parents and mine have paid such a high price for us to be here. Meanwhile some of us fail them.

We forget that many of our grandmothers, as domestic servants, took care of white children all day, washed hard floors on their knees so long and so often until they would bleed and become calloused through the torture. And as she worked, our grandmother would hum "*Bring me over Great Jehovah*" and say "*Jesus*"

; and sometimes the salty perspiration from her beautiful brow would roll down her cheeks meeting the tears and slowly a drop would fall here and there. And she did that hard work- so that you and I would never have to! Sometimes our mother, grandmothers or great grandmothers would come home so tired that they hardly had the strength to cook dinner for their own children or to help them with homework, or to look for them in the streets where they may be playing or "hanging out", to stop them from getting into gangs, to stop them from using drugs, to stop them from having babies due to premarital, unprotected sex... Some of our mothers still wash floors, clean houses, and work as clerks, do hair, or work as manual laborers. Yes, it saddens me that we have forgotten that we stand on their shoulders.

It saddens me to think that your fathers and mine worked to build bridges, and schools, and universities just like the U of M. They labored in fields toiling the soil and crushing their backs. They toiled the soil that their children would never own, and built the buildings in which their children could not enter for an education. And with the strength and pride that only a Black man possesses, the pride of a Prince, of royalty, of divine selection, sometimes our fathers, and grandfathers and great grandfathers would have to say: "Yes sir Mr. Bo, Mr. Jackson, Mr. Tom,".... "*Yes, sir Mr. Electric Company, Mr. Telephone Company, Mr. Rent Man, Mr. Food Stamp Man ... Yes sir, Yes sir, Yes Sir!*" Often to white men who were half their ages.

But after picking up the day's pay or arranging one more extension on the rent or the electricity or the water, SOMEBODY'S father would say "*Thank you Father, maker of heaven and earth.*" They would say, "*I can feed and shelter my family --- just a little while longer*." Maybe he would whistle "*Precious Lord*"

"...and sometimes in the evening our fathers were in so much pain, they could not lift their children or play with them or teach them how to drive, or teach them about manhood or womanhood. Sometimes they were too tired to teach them how to love and respect themselves, or to teach them about their history or to give them encouragement, or to stop them from taking drugs, joining gangs, looking for manhood or woman behind sex, vulgar mouths and disrespect of others.... Some of our fathers still work, drive trucks, build houses, and work as janitors, field hands, and common laborers. Yes, its saddens me that we forget that we stand on their shoulders.

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The price they paid (and still do) for your benefit and mine was great, was awesome – so that we could be educated, and have access to opportunity. When your grandparents toiled the soil and scrubbed the floors, they expected that each ache would result in a betterment of their children's welfare. Whether you were motherless or fatherless or had parents who were abusive and no good; whether you were rich, well to do, or poor on welfare and raised in dire poverty...Somebody suffered for YOU! Maybe it was not your parents, but your grandparents, or your great grandparents or your great-great grandparents. But somebody suffered for you so that you could be here today and the have an opportunity for success. And yet, the question remains...what do we do with that opportunity? What has come of it? The truth is that many of us have taken it for granted. We have taken it for granted that we can vote forgetting that not 40 years ago, African Americans would be whipped, beaten, hung, and raped on the way to the voting booths! And IF they made it to the booths, their ballots would be illegally destroyed or they would have to pay a "Poll Tax" so high that it would represent a week's wages and SOMEBODY would have to decide if voting freedom was more important then putting food in the mouths of their children. Yet, when election time comes around, most of us do not vote; and many of us do not even register to vote. Yes, we have taken it for granted that we stand on somebody's shoulders.

We have taken it for granted that we deserve and can get an education. Yet, we forget that SOMEBODY was burned alive in a school bus bombing trying to integrate schools because separate, but equal was a lie. We take it for granted that we can get an education forgetting that not 40 years ago, young black students tried to enter a school in Alabama with the GOVERNOR of the state holding a shotgun barring them at the door from entering; with people throwing food at them, spitting at them, beating them up between classes, and whispering words like the "*N-word*," "*Coon*" *Black stupid Baboon!*" —and some of them did not even whisper—they yelled it! And yet today, many of us have come from the back of the bus to the fronts of the classrooms—only to flunk out!

Some statistics say that in Minnesota over 87% of White students graduate from high school, yet less than 45% of Blacks do. Sometimes our children flunk out because we as a community check out, give up and throw them away. It is clear that educators know how to teach white students; however, they do not know how to teach those of color, especially black boys. Consequently, it is my contention that our children do not flunk out because they are less intelligent as posed by white psychologists such as Arthur Jensen, nor do they flunk out because they have a smaller brain capacity due to their smaller cranial diameter as Philippe Rushton claims. No, our children flunk out because we allow them to come home and play video games all night and do not turn the television off. They flunk out because white teachers are afraid of them (and you) and therefore do not challenge them or hold high expectations of them. Some of them flunk out because we are not available as parents because we work too much, party too much, use drugs and alcohol too much, and believe that our children should be there to nurture and care for US (instead of the other way around). Some of our children flunk out because they depend on their athletic abilities to give them a future when someday they could be irrevocably hurt or they may never be good enough for the NFL or NBA! Our children flunk out because they do not study, they skip class, they do not know how to study and do not get help in learning how to study. They flunk out because they forget the backs that they have climbed on and the sacrificial prices that have been paid for them to be in school. They forgot

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that they stand on somebody's shoulders and we fail to remind them.

It is my hope that we will begin this new year with a renewed commitment to honor those who came before us. Perhaps many of us do not think well enough of ourselves to change our attitudes and behaviors in order to become diligent in our pursuit of personal and collective success. Perhaps some of us have simply given up on the notion that we can survive anything. Perhaps some of us believe that life is supposed to hurt, and being black is supposed to be a burden. We are not responsible for what has been done to us, or even what is being done to us; however, we are responsible for how we react to our past, our present, and our future. What I think is that we have the personal and collective power as a people to hold ourselves accountable for what we can do. We have the right to wellness, abundance and success. A right that has been bought and paid for by those who came before us. Therefore, I think that one of the greatest gifts that we can give each other this Black History Month is to remember the African proverb: *"If we stand tall, it is ONLY because we stand on the shoulders of many ancestors."*

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