

Black Humanity and the Crisis of “Home”

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It is no wonder that there are problems, captured in statistics and spirit and memory. How could things have been otherwise? Black humanity is simply, in the final analysis, humanity. And human beings need their homes – not mere dwellings, not mere abodes – if they are to flourish.

Though marriage is universal, there are all sorts of context for it. Some people marry in cultures that relegate women to what is considered to be a “naturally” subservient position. Some people marry in cultures, such as this one, that valorize marriage with one breath and, with the next, valorize a commercialist and consumerist system outside of the home that serves to undermine marriage. Some people marry where both spouses are from a privileged class or caste, and discover the unique set of problems that privilege can bring. Others struggle to make ends meet; this brings another set of problems. Gays struggle for the recognition of their unions as marriages, and where they can be legally married must suffer through the pelting of doubts from their straight compatriots, served up in pregnant pauses, jaded glances, and sly quips. And if you are black in America and you marry (would marry), there remain long tentacles that still find their way from the bowels of history and into the lives of blacks as individuals and as collectives. There are specters that still haunt, demons that still plague. And so it goes.

The bare notion of marriage, for any one, is well known. It is a union, a commitment for the long-haul – if not for life, then at least for as long as the children need to be raised, or for some period of time that is placed well forward, toward a horizon that does justice to the mutual covenants that are given. It is not a commitment to be taken lightly. It involves shared space, the promise of mutual support concerning the exigencies of life; otherwise, it is not marriage, but something else. Some prefer to say that it is a union in the eyes of God. Yet, that is not all. For the *contexts* matter, and “the eyes of God” is not a context that we mere mortals can get our heads around, even if, for many, God holds an important place. It is the contexts that condition our ability to enter into and negotiate a marriage, just as they condition our ability to enter into a business deal, a friendship, or a career.

To talk about “black marriage” is to talk about marriages within a nexus of contexts. In the black community, it is little wonder that the statistics concerning marriage seem so bleak. But as blacks are human beings, how could it have been otherwise? The frustrated rhetorical question “Why can’t we fix our problems?” is cogent, and apt, and has its place. But we must be careful to avoid velleities. We can indulge ourselves in them, shake our heads, point to the troubling statistics. But we must also, even as we point to the problems and possible solutions,

remember *why*. Remembering why is important; it blunts the harsher criticisms and self-criticisms that can lead, do lead, to despair. We don't want to indulge failure, but we must let love and understanding have a place in our analyses and rhetoric.

I read that in the early 1960s a little less than seventy percent of black households were headed by married couples, and that by 2002 only about forty-eight percent were. In 2002, only thirty-one percent of black women were married. Black women remain the most likely women to be heads of households. Households headed by females are the most likely to be below the federal poverty line. And so on.

Understanding all of these data means understanding a great deal of cultural, economic and racial cross-currents, and I am not so sure that many of us do. These statistics are not what they are simply because of racism, or feminism, or consumerism, or individualism, but because of all of these, and more that go unnamed. Many black women are wary of marriage for a variety of reasons that make their wariness quite rational indeed. Many reckon that, given the stresses placed on black men by a range of factors, the likelihood of a successful marriage, or even of a nurturing long-term relationship, at least *seems* doubtful. This, coupled with the fact that many black men who have seemed to overcome those stresses and have achieved relative economic and/or social success seem more focused on maintaining that success than establishing households with a spouse or partner, create headwinds for black relationships that might lead to marriage. As for black men, statistics show that they are much less likely to graduate college than black women and their white counterparts, and unemployment rates for black men still soar above those of white men. Unemployment among blacks in general has recently approached seventeen percent.

Pointing to anomic behaviors among the black poor, as some are wont to do, doesn't explain everything, although this is deemed to be the culprit in simplistic analyses of the reasons that black marriage seems to be waning. The headwinds that affect black marriage do not only blow from *within* the black community. In the United States, there is a strong consumerist culture and there is a rampant "me-ism" that also lend themselves to the deterioration of black marriage, just as they lend themselves to the deterioration of family life (and financial prudence) more generally. Blacks, already weakened, are more susceptible to these forces than whites and other demographics, and have been, with certain exceptions, for a very long time. Blacks spend far too much and save far too little. We are drawn into the consumerist culture that exists in America though we can least afford to be. We continue to be taken in by the constant Sirens' song to buy more and more gadgets, clothes, and image-related items, than shares of stock or certificates of deposit. This renders many unprepared for the financial obligations that come with marriage, and financial stress is a leading cause of marital distress and marital failure, as we all know.

Of course, while it is true that anomic behaviors don't explain everything, they do explain *some* things, along with the fact that there are fewer and fewer patterns for both black boys and black girls that might guide them in such matters as choosing mates, setting-up a household and creating a real *home* ("household" is a sterile sociological term; "home" speaks to the creation of a filial spirit), and providing the spousal and parental supports needed over the long-haul to make the home successful. Many black girls have seen so few examples of successful men in their families that they harbor serious doubts about black men in general. Black boys, raised in so many households without fathers, lack exposure to the subtle-yet-crucial patterns of behavior and thought needed to serve as good fathers and nurturers themselves (and this is not to say that only "maleness" can shape character; but it has an important place in homes with boys in them). Many, quite *rationaly*, find support in gangs or among peers outside of gangs, and look to images in the media to serve as exemplars and role models. But such images can only show what is *possible*, not the *processes* required to achieve goals that, over a lifetime, establish success. Seeing the space shuttle take off is one thing, building it is another. It is the long slog that creates success, not the enticement of glossy magazine images of black males in business suits holding snifters of brandy, or in flight suits on the decks of aircraft carriers, though these have their place.

The confluence of these and other factors has led some to the curious conclusion that "marriage is for white people." Peeling back the layers of possible interpretation of this facially insane conclusion, I take it to mean that it is (perceived that) only whites, who can afford to establish the foundations for a successful, long-term, and reasonably happy marriage – in *this* society – can actually pull it off. But while this conclusion may be curious, even troubling, it is not nonsensical. In fact, it is a reasonable conclusion, given the evidence. The conclusion "marriage is for white people" can be read as other than normative, and only to mean that the plethora of factors arrayed against blacks, some deliberately destructive and some merely insidious or corrosive or vestigial (or all of the preceding), means that marriage as an institution must be ceded to "other demographics" that seem to have the wherewithal – financially, culturally, communally, spiritually – to make it work.

It is often said that were Dr. King alive today he would be appalled at the general condition of the black family and the general state of affairs in the black community, and rage against them with righteous disdain, like Moses descending from the mountain, seeing the Israelites circled around the Golden Calf. That's a good vignette for a cartoon version of our martyr, but Dr. King was not as spiritually and intellectually shallow as that. While he would lament the conditions, were he here, he would also Understand them. He would understand that while integration was a worthy goal, it also had an effect on black communal spirit and on what a colleague of mine calls "black sodality." He would understand the urge to reach for things that were previously denied, sometimes at the cost of communal and even filial bonds. He would

understand that blacks, since the civil rights movement, have felt the need to create alternative cultures that were either cultures of resistance or cultures of identity, or both, separate and apart from the dominant “Anglo cultures” so much associated with the former oppressor. He would understand that just as blacks are less equipped, after generations of oppression, to resist harmful social forces in general, they would be less equipped to resist the harmful social forces of materialism and consumerism more specifically. I think King would understand all of these things, even in the midst of his lamentations, and even as he prescribed solutions.

So do I. Love and understanding go together. Loving a people who have been so put upon would seem to entail understanding, even compassion. While we may tend to think that all of those horrible statistics about blacks should be better, we must face up to the fact that they are not – not in spite of but because of a very peculiar history and social milieu out of which neither blacks, nor whites, nor the nation as a whole have emerged. Not yet. Not entirely. So there is some distance left to travel before those statistics change. There is no telling what the collection of forces and factors will be that end the entropy – that turn the tide of failure and begin a long journey toward success in the various ways success can be understood. But it will come, in one way or another. In the meantime, what does love demand that we do?

That’s hard to say when it is not clear what is meant by “we.” Indeed, is there such a thing as “the black community?” Once, perhaps during King’s or Garvey’s days, that question would have been easy to answer. Black identity coalesced around such things as mere melanin, the black church (or at least fatigue with it), resistance, the idea that you had to be “twice as good as them” if you want to make it, a collective set of sensibilities about the world and how to engage it. Some of these survive, but many are fading, have faded. The swing of the intellectual pendulum against even the notion of race (including that there is a black and a white one), drills down even deeper into the taproot of the idea of a “we.” Are blacks even entitled to think of themselves as a “we,” while the spirit of the times undercuts the idea of static identities, the significance of melanin as an *axis mundi* around which to gather or rally? Among the black middle classes, there seems to have always been at least *some* retreat from the idea of a black “we” robust enough to root an overall identity. Education and money, however slowly it came, allowed the black middle class to entertain other possibilities.

Among the youth of the black working class and the black poor, there has been the construction of an identity that has created sodality. But remember, understanding context is important to understanding in general. The context of that particular black identity has been somewhat hostile to the values and sensibilities of the black middle class. By now, this is an old story, one that is not entirely true, but true enough. In rejecting some dimensions of the white/black/other middle class (certain habits, certain affections, certain forms of speech, certain sensibilities), too many working class blacks have also rejected (or have simply not come

to value) many of the screws and nuts and framing that hold the middle class in its place – they are the things that, in part, keep the middle class out of poverty, although sometimes just barely.

This is understandable. The resistance to certain “middle class values” has its merits at times, Lord knows, even beyond the black community. Yet what tends to get called “middle class values” do not *belong* to the middle class as such (or the white middle class as such), and in fact belong to all of us, if we want to employ them. When you hear an old man in a poor black neighborhood decrying the conduct of certain of his neighbors, he is expressing his commitment to those values. When you see a mother in a housing project chastising her daughter for getting a conduct report from a teacher, she is expressing her commitment to those values. When you see a young boy on the subway trying to make sense of his *Scientific American*, he is expressing those values. “Middle class values” are no more than common sense, the application of reason to life’s challenges, and the application of resolve to maintain the things one holds dear after long labor to acquire them. They are not simply about affectation (although sometimes, sadly, they are), but rather they are about *flourishing*. In too much of the black community, common sense has gone missing not because rationality has gone missing, but rather because of the array of forces that serve to replace common sense with uncommon sense – the uncommon sense that says immediate gratification trumps deferred pleasure (“We Real cool. . . . We Jazz June,” in the immortal words of Gwendolyn Brooks); that says that rejecting “Anglo values” means that one must reject values indiscriminately, the needless constraints that they are; that says that the whole structure of customs and norms that whites (and Asians and Brazilians and Nigerians, etc.) hold is all caught up with a way of being in the world that blacks can do without.

The fact is that nobody can do without them, and whites didn’t invent them. The belief that they did is one of the terrible and toxic illusions that is still suffered in too much of the African American community, even if it is not acknowledged as such, even if it is not conscious. Such values are as old as the human brain is old. They are what keep the rich, rich and their absence has the doggedly persistent effect of keeping the poor, poor. They help you cut through life’s obstacles with greater ease, but their absence will leave you mired in the muck of human existence. Blacks know that this is no meritocracy, but persistence and credentials and mutual support can still kick open some doors.

No group of people can do well, for long, without stable homes – the incubators of the good friend, the solid citizen, the hero, the worthy spouse, even the good death. If we would get beyond the notion that “marriage is for white people” we need to get beyond the notion that the incubator can be neglected. This doesn’t mean that some blacks need to assume a new *Über*-sensitivity toward family and home – walk around with an “F” for Family on their chests,

wear their commitment to family on their sleeves. It just means that we need to consider not merely all the things that need to be *avoided* in order to *not* become a statistic, but also the important resources that a stable home provides, even when home gets hard sometimes. An important key to changing black marriage (or its decline) is for some blacks who give the home short shrift to think again, and then to make the home the center of the universe, even when home gets difficult. *It's supposed to be difficult*. It is one of the most important places in the world, and making it work is no easy thing.

The home, whether founded by straight or gay partners, is where life really happens. It does not need to be fancy or expensive, just as clean and as safe and as beautiful as you can make it. It is in the safety of the home that the blossoms of children's personalities come forth, just when you aren't looking. It is the place where a husband re-pledges in the silence of the bedroom to never touch another woman again as he watches his wife, who has given him so much, asleep in the soft light that sneaks in from the hallway. It is where you get the letter that Uncle James or Aunt Ruby has died, and where you all sit in a kind of circle and weep together, share memories, and feel shitty, and then go on to cook dinner and lay out your clothes for the next day. Home is where the kids drive you insane in one instant, and make you laugh in the next. It's where you lay in bed at night holding hands, and talk about your latest crisis of faith, or sob out your confessions, or sing oldies in the dark. It is the place where you are forgiven, and where you learn to forgive. It is what is left when there is nothing left, and it takes heart and hearts to keep it going. It's *worth* it. It makes everything else worth it, too.

I have learned all of this over my 26 years of marriage to my wife, my spouse, my life partner, Renee Osborne. We have had our setbacks, our painful times (some almost unbearable), the joys and sorrows that come with being together that long, with suffering through each other's changes. No doubt there is more to come. Is it worth it? Sometimes my feelings tell me, *No*. But always, my head tells me, *Yes, of course it is!* And sometimes, when grace descends, my feelings and my head form a unity, and I know that life is only good because of the home that we have built, and that the really important things I have done in my life had nothing to do with building a business or getting a Ph.D. or any other more or less solitary pursuit. All of the struggles to keep things on track have been worth it. And here's the thing – at some point along the way, when you least expect it, home is no longer the four walls that hold your bodies and your furniture – home becomes a mystical thing that you can carry with you, that resides inside of you rather than you inside of it, and nobody can take it away from you, not even dying. When my sons Alex and Nick tell me that they love me and that they are grateful to have me as their Dad, I can hear the voice of God speaking to me through them, and the other stuff I have done in my life pales. I know that if I were to drop dead right now, I have done my work. And no, it wasn't always easy, and I can still screw it up. But so far, so good.

I understand the statistics. If we want to change them, we need to re-discover the value of home, because home is where the action is. Its value and its promise transcend bling and fads and money. The bonds made there cannot only last a lifetime, but can create material, spiritual and cultural wealth that can be passed down from one generation to the next, like bars of gold. Saving marriage, whether in “the black community” or elsewhere, means coming to, once again, appreciate the value of home. And you don’t need to be with someone, or in a relationship, to start thinking about that, now. Home is not simply the place where you lay your head, eat your meals, and recover from illness. It is the place where you – working together with family – plant the seeds of love and life and success in the bodies and the souls of those who dwell there and even, sometimes, in the bodies and souls of those who are just passing through; where those seeds are watered and fed so that what happens grows larger than the sum of the parts. Home is not a house; it is not an apartment. It cannot be created alone. It is not a mere place; it is what happens there that makes it what it is. Two or more committed souls are the primary ingredients. Then comes the work. Can you be single and have a home? So long as it is a nexus of love and commitment, surely; that’s why grandma’s house is also home. It is the place where spirit lives, and to which spirit returns.

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