

A CONVERSATION WITH BLACK MEN

(Held at University of Virginia)

I first thought about having a conversation with black men when I was invited by the NAACP in my hometown of Hartford, Conn. to be their keynote speaker. They were also honoring my mother that evening for more than 50 years of service to the NAACP. Hartford's black community is like many of our black communities today, riddled with crime, and young men killing each other over drugs. It took me some time to decide what my topic would be, I finally decided that I would talk on a subject that I never talked about before, but it made a lot of sense to me. My topic was African-American gender relations. This is a topic which few of us dare discuss-publicly or privately. We don't often speak openly about the difficulty black men and women have sustaining loving relationships. As black men we also don't take the opportunity to discuss what we think about ourselves, each other, our fathers, our sons and what kind of father we want to become...Since I was at home I reminisced...Let me share with you a few of the comments that I made on the evening of November 21, 2003.

Growing up I didn't consciously miss having a father. Not until I was grown did I feel the absence of a strong Black male presence in my life. As an adult, I came to realize that the absence of a Black male presence has devastating effects on our families and on our communities. I wasn't conscious of that in my youth... I was one of those brothers, like so many of us growing up in a project or anywhere in the black community, who couldn't wait until Friday night to go to the club looking for the ladies. It was basketball and ladies! We never thought there was anything wrong with this form of exploitation. We thought that we were lovers, but we really were haters. We had learned to behave like our fathers, uncles, and brothers behaved toward women. Our role models were often men who had multiple, disrespectful relationships with women. Many of us felt that this was what it meant to be a man, that our identity as men resided in our penises. No one sat us down to tell us that we should respect Black women. The way we saw it --the more, the better. We proved that we were "men" with our insensitivity-- our refusal to communicate, our unwillingness to show nurturing and care. As little boys we learned early in life to act "mannish." We were loyal only to our male friends, always wanting to prove something to each other. In his book, *Why I Love Black Women*, Michael Eric Dyson tells us that when a man relies on other men's judgment of his manhood, any woman he relates to is set up to be a potential third party. Our relationships with women suffer as a result.

As many of us are aware, African-American male and female relationships have always been problematic. This problem is the major internal source of the wider problems of African-Americans. According to sociologist Orlando Patterson, 60 percent of African-American children have been abandoned by their fathers. Why is it that sixty percent of African-American children are now being brought up without the emotional or material support of a father? This is so because the great majority of African-American mothers have been seduced, deceived, betrayed, and abandoned by the men to whom they gave their love and trust."

The most common response among African-Americans to this tragedy has been to sweep the problem under the rug with talk about not washing dirty linen in public. Tonight I want us to begin to talk about our feelings and issues that we have on our minds.

In *Souls of My Brothers: Black Men Break Their Silence, Tell Their Stories, and Heal Our Spirits*-By Dawn Marie Daniels and Candace Sandy. They state...When Black men break their silence and begin to talk to one another, when they open their hearts to themselves and to others, when they begin to confront their collective demons, they will begin to heal themselves, their souls, and their world. Black men's stories are not just a birthright, but also a legacy to be shared and passed on to fathers, brothers, sons, wives, daughters, the community, and the world. Collectively, we can heal our spirits so that we continue to be, as our ancestors were, the intellectual, mighty, strong, and prosperous people we have always been...So just like the white lady who clutches her purse when you walk up behind her, brothers too, are programmed and taught to be afraid, not just of other black men, but even to be afraid of themselves. We are all products of the same socialization. We all watch the same television programs growing up. We went to the same kinds of school and studied the same kind of curricula. We all were indoctrinated with the same images by the media of brothers as criminals, drug dealers, thugs, con men, pimps, and crackheads. The script was implanted firmly into our minds early, and now as adults we're reading our lines off it like seasoned actors.

Let's break our silence tonight and begin to discuss some issues. I have raised four questions that I would like for us to discuss for 20 minutes in small groups.

1. How important is it that black males at UVa become more actively involved in the life of the UVa community?
2. Black men are recognized for having good, loving relationships with their mothers and are notorious for having problematic relationships with their partners, spouses, and the mothers of their children. How can we bring into line the behavior of black men as sons with their behavior as fathers, partners, and spouses?
3. HIV/AIDS is quickly becoming the leading cause of death for African-American women ages 25-44. What implications does this have for black men? What are black men doing to specifically address this problem? How can black men confront this increasing problem?
4. What is your vision of leadership for black men for the 21st century? What specific goals and attributes do you associate with leadership? Where do you see yourself in your own paradigm of leadership?

My plans are to continue these conversations on a greater basis. Our next conversation will take place in April.

M. Rick Turner
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