

In my Father's House

"The future of Black Fatherhood"

17.

My work specifically in the area of responsible fatherhood commenced nearly five years ago. It has been the most satisfying and validating work I have ever done. Two years ago, I thought I knew it all. I now know I did not know much of anything. Two years later, I know a hell of a lot more and remain open to learning more. The area of responsible fatherhood remains a small network of men and women across the world seeking to find ways to bring fathers back into the lives of their families.

The Moynihan report of 1968 spoke to the issue of fatherlessness and its contribution to the demise of the Black family. No truer words have ever been spoken. Many viewed the report as a racial diatribe to further layer existing stereotypes about what Malcolm X described as the, "so-called negro." Today we find that since 1970, two years after the report, African American males have been on the negative end of almost every social statistic imaginable. We still fail to recognize its impact.

That report will become a self fulfilling prophesy if we do not begin to address ways to incorporate fathers back into the family environment. We cannot afford to fail in addressing this issue.

The fatherhood movement has its warriors; men and women who have recognized the impact of fatherlessness; either through their own upbringing or

those around them. These individuals despite little or no funds continue to find ways to expose the need to focus social programs on men and/or fathers. It is obvious that any father (race, creed, religion, etc.) separated from his child's life will likely have a negative effect. Children of color are impacted the greatest.

Children will find love where it exists. My pastor always says to us, "If I'm not teaching you, who is?" Today's youth are unwavering in the quest to find love; anywhere. So, if it is absent at home it will be falsely manifested in the streets; and their desire to obtain it will be the same. Society is exhibiting alternative family units, in replacement of, in compensation for and in spite of fathers not being involved.

Pop culture has made it acceptable for fathers to choose not to be involved in the lives of their children. Society further perpetuates fatherlessness by validating its message with terms like, baby daddy. This has become an acceptable way to identify a father who is more than likely not with his children. It also indicates to men that his value can be minimized to slang or a catchy phrase. Much like young African Americans who embrace the N-word as a term of endearment; some fathers have begun to use the term to describe themselves. "Baby Daddy" takes away the identity and dignity of both the father and the child. I am Tiarrah's father. I am Nzinga's father. The statement gives my daughters their identity and I my role and respect.

Mr. Mom is another misnomer often used to describe fathers; as if being a Dad is not respectable enough. This expression gives one the impression that somehow you have to validate a Dad's active engagement in his responsibility by calling him a mom. Another example of a poor choice of words is often used when asking the father if he is babysitting his children. Parents don't baby sit their own kids!

Society has also perpetuated the negative image of fatherhood with the use of terminology like deadbeat dads, as if it were a compound word. Forever doomed to be linked. When in reality and statistically, the vast majority of fathers are fully responsible; both financially and emotionally. The moniker is just as ridiculous as, "all men are dogs," "all men are liars," or "all men are abusers."

While pop culture has done its damage to the image of fatherhood, programmatically government also had a helping hand in shaping the negative portrayal of fathers as well. Welfare Reform did well for women and children. However, it did it so at the expense of men and fathers. We can all give reasons and excuses for its occurrence, but few can deny its impact. Research continues to show how dads make a difference either positively or negatively. The goal is to increase the positive contributions.

There are so many areas of concern for the fatherhood movement. This is probably the first time in modern history a movement of this kind has taken place by grassroots organizations operated solely by men. This movement has found its way through communities that recognized fatherlessness is of grave concern. It has solely been a movement by fathers who have identified the struggles of other men in maintaining nurturing relationships with their children.

We wrestle however with obtaining the expertise and resources necessary to sustain the work on the ground. Noticeably over the last few years, agencies, federal government and individual states have taken the responsibility to address the fatherhood; however, grassroots entities continue to lag sorely behind. Because of the lack of programmatic funding, many organizations only find the resources to plan events like day workshops, conferences, and lectures. Subsequently, we fail to do any significant work in the other areas of need for fathers.

For those of us who work in the field of responsible fatherhood, we owe it to the men we serve to know the issues. The need to be versed in the advancements of responsible fatherhood and be somewhat knowledgeable in as many areas as possible will be critical. We all know why we do what we do. The challenging area will be in how we do what we do. Organizational development and strategic planning should be our cornerstone for success. We will find those who are better prepared, organized and networked will find greater success than others.

It is contingent upon us to seek out legitimate curriculums and proven consultants in the field of fatherhood. Because the field is new in its development, many programs and curriculums are home based and may not have proven results. Ask around. Although the network is small, the benefit is that anyone in the field for reasons other than to do the serious work of responsible fatherhood, will be noticed.

Many service providers have found various niches in this work. Some find more comfortable areas as a result of personal passions, while others will solely work based on the immediate need in their own demographics of concern.

An entire industry has emerged to tackle the issue of men returning from incarceration. Few have become experts in identifying the issues and even providing programs on small scales. However, until the entire network of fatherhood services finds a way to be aware of each other, little will be available for the multitude of the problems of the more than 60,000 inmates released a year; here in New York State alone.

The fatherhood movement will also need to address the impact of child support on the lives of men who are willing to provide for their children, but have found difficulty in complying with orders. Opportunities of job training and education must be offered to allow men to obtain adequate wage earning careers. The system of child support enforcement must become sensitive to both the

employee who has found gainful employment and the employer's need to maintain a consistent workforce.

It is important to maintain levels of financial support for children, but forcing men away from legitimate jobs because enforcement measures make it difficult for one's own survival is counter-productive. I believe many states have begun to address this issue, however, public support for innovative ideas will be needed from the responsible fatherhood arena and its supporters to make legislative and policy changes. Currently the misunderstanding between the work of responsible fatherhood and father's rights have made these changes difficult to achieve.

Researchers must become more responsive to the need to provide up-to-date information on the changing environment of families. Being able to focus on fathers will be a tremendous help for organizations in need of legitimate and longitudinal information. The anomaly of race can no longer be ignored in current and future research. It is imperative that race and culture be moved to higher priorities around the studies involving fatherhood. Information today is sketchy at best. Knowing good funding follows good research, the responsible fatherhood field must encourage and participate in more research projects.

Additionally, the field of social workers must create and maintain cultural competency. No one understands a cohort better than someone who represents it. Innovative measures must be taken to include the subject of responsible fatherhood in the conversation and studying of family development. As the definition of family broadens, the need to get back to the basics is equally important.

As many of us in the field have realized, men are experiencing an intense need for support. One of the un-chartered fields of services in the fatherhood movement is mental health. We have finally recognized the need for men to just talk about their issues. There are support groups for addictions, diseases,

traumas, and stresses which facilitate a mechanism of release through sharing stories with people who have had like experiences. Our inability or desire not to communicate creates a bottling up of pain waiting to expose itself in some capricious manner.

Faith-Based institutions have historically been the best place to organize and conduct support groups. Currently around the country they host groups for almost every kind of addiction, hang-up and vice imaginable. However, we have failed to address the state of mind of men who have been systematically shut out of the lives of their children. No one would argue, if a mother by any means lost her children, that she would be a candidate for therapy; on the other hand, this thought rarely arises when fathers face that same fate.

Recently the media was saturated with the story of Britney Spears and her troubles; including her custody battle. The entire public, even though watching her life play out in the media, were horrified when she lost custody of her sons. No one considered for a minute that K-Fed might actually care for his kids and despite his own issues might still be a better parent.

In this instance, the media perpetuated the idea that no matter how down and out a mother is; she is still capable of being the better parent. To add insult to injury, the judge, like so many others before and after him used the word, "lost" to describe the way in which she lost custody. You see, the problem is not that the newspapers said she lost custody, but they quoted, "she lost her kids." The definition of the word lost is "no longer possessed or retained," or more importantly the word lose which means "to come to be without." The use of this word causes a sense of desperation in parents to regain possession of their children.

Any mother should be outraged to hear she has lost her children, just as any father would. However, society is more readily susceptible to hearing a father

has "lost" his kids, as opposed to a mother. Unfortunately we have to live with the reality that "lost" is a very real term for us. We internalize this term as being acceptable and binding; evidenced by the fact that child support is overly enforced on many fathers, yet the denial of custody and visitation for fathers seems to have no penalty for the mothers who perpetuate the paranoia of the word "lost".

The courts have to do a better job at finding equity for men in family court. Every father that walks into court is not a deadbeat, sometimes just dead-broke. Furthermore, law guardians truly have to represent the best interest of the child only; by not dismissing the valued existence of the father. Child support and child welfare workers as well need to be trained in fatherhood awareness and sensitivity. Periodic training and assessment to make sure workers in the field are not bringing their own biases to their profession is imperative.

While the responsible fatherhood field is still in its infancy, it is poised to have the best potential in strengthening families. Bright young innovators and seasoned elders are engaging in breakthrough work. Others are eagerly awaiting instructions and clear examples of best practices. Unfortunately, many pessimistically sit by hoping for failure and opportunities to destroy the legitimacy of the work.

Whatever your reason for working within the fatherhood movement, there is plenty of work to go around for everyone. Collaboration and networking will become key elements in keeping up with the demand of servicing and supporting fathers.

However, it is time to stop philosophizing and time to begin to do the necessary work in the field. I have learned in my work in Fathers Incorporated that the demand is high and the services are few. Organizations without the ability to provide full services including employment, training, parenting classes, life skills

development, child support, community re-entry from incarceration, and support will find it difficult to service the myriad of issues presented by fathers. Others who do not have the capacity to provide full services will need to have strong networks and collaborative partners.

This is where I have come in the 46 short years of my life. Everything I been taught and everything I have done has brought me to this place. This book is just a snapshot of my life. We all learn from our experiences and mine in most instances are not different than your own. I have attempted to take just the tipping points of my life to illustrate what shaped me into the man and father I am today. In my story, I pray that you find your own story.

Twenty-nine years ago I left home to become a man. What I did not know was it was just the beginning of my journey. Hindsight being 20/20, I think I became a man that day. For 29 years, I have just been on a continuing quest to become a better one. I have had my ups and my downs. God has tested me, managed my process and controlled my destiny. My will is to just be obedient.

Four years ago when I thought life had nothing else to offer, God gave me a word, "Fathers."

Ever since that day, I have been obedient and steadfast in my anointing to have my voice resonate in the hearts of men. Everything I have touched, every vision professed and every move made since then has been blessed. My pastor helped me understand in a sermon one day when he said to me, "God started preparing you two years ago for a job you never knew existed."

It came on August 19, 2006. I was hired by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance to run a \$9 million Fatherhood Initiative and the nation's first Noncustodial Earned Income Tax Credit.

Recently after conducting a workshop, I thanked God for my position. I received back an evaluation in which someone wrote, "You should worry more about being prepared and less about what God has done for you." It brings tears to my eyes and joy knowing everything I have ever done in life is attributed to my faith in God. It was life's experiences that have contributed to my ability to write this book.

There is no way on earth, I will let anyone separate me from my God now. He is not finished with me yet. I am no where near a perfect man, but perfect for this job—there is more to come.

I have told this story many times before, but it is my testimony, so I have to tell it again. For years, I asked God to take away my tears when I spoke. I believed that the tears took away from my ability to communicate. As if somehow, people would not get the effectiveness of my speech. One day He said to me, "When you speak, it's Me speaking through you. When you cry, it's Me speaking to you."