

On Being an Excellent Black Man

**Black Women's Coalition's
Tribute to Black Men**

February, 2012

Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to be here and to speak at this important event—an event where we publicly applaud the accomplishments of gentlemen. How often does one get to attend an event whose sole purpose is to honor and praise black men?

I would like to thank the women of the Black Women's Coalition who have organized this wonderful event. You all have put lots of time and energy into getting us all together in the name of fellowship and solidarity. We witnessed this demonstration of love last week at the Black Men's Union's Tribute to Black Women, and here we are again, now with the men basking as recipients of interchange. What a wonderful and powerful display of modeling that you are propagating.

I finally would like to thank each of you in the room. You all could have been anywhere else, doing countless other things, but you chose to be here, in this place, and for this, I am grateful.

In the few minutes that I have to speak, I have been asked to say a few words about black male excellence, and how I believe we can support black males. This speech is a bit longer than I'd planned, but there are so many good things to say about black male excellence. I plan to debunk a few myths that people have about us, challenge us to be about the business of defining our own selves, and to leave you with an affirmation that frees us from the possible limitations we are tempted to hold in our minds.

Contrary to the negativity that's constantly being spewed at and about black men, you know, the things you hear on TV, read in newspapers, and see depicted on stage and on the big screen that render black men less than anyone else—in the classroom, on the job, in the home, I will not fall into the trap of adding to or agreeing with these beliefs. Yes, our history has plenty of examples of black men who have not lived up to their potential and have not learned to learn, have not done right by their families and children, and who have contributed to the things that trouble the world, but I can cite evidence of these deficits in every group, regardless of race, gender, class, or nationality. I strongly caution us not to define ourselves by our inadequacies, but by our virtues.

For much too long, we have listened to and allowed other folks to underpin, in our own psyches, a message about us that many of us truly believe. Such messages say that we aren't good enough, smart enough, savvy enough, or not equal to. Many of us continue to listen to and internalize this information without taking time to question or research the accuracy or authenticity of these statistics, and as a result, we perpetuate the untrue or inaccurate notions of ourselves.

We often hear that there are more black males in jail than in college. This includes military jails, private corrections, and institutions for the criminally insane. This is not true regardless of age, but the ratio of black men in college to men in jail, correctional facilities, and institutions for the criminally insane is four to one. We all know that this statistic must improve, but

let's not be misled to think that there are more black men in jail than in college. Not true.

How about this misperception: The rate of black men enrolling in college is stagnant and is less than any other racial group. According to the latest US Census, black men are enrolling in College at a higher rate than white and Latino males—only surpassed by Asian males.

There is one more misleading stat that I'll share and I'll move on. It's been often believed that many educated black men have the propensity to marry outside of their race. Now it could be true in the Yale bubble, I don't know, is it? Nationally, however, the US Census reported that only 5.1% of black men marry white women, or said in a different way, 94.9% of black men who are married are not married to a white woman.

I know we could discuss this particular topic for the rest of the evening, and I am not here to open up a can of worms; the point I want to make is this: For far too long, we have listened to and believed statistics that are not accurate. We have allowed others to define us negatively as lazy, unmotivated, under-educated, and ill-prepared for the best jobs, the most competitive salaries, and the best opportunities for advancement, and this sadly reinforces a collective misperception of our own identities. We must do a better job of debunking negative images of us by other people. If the question is how we can support our black males, one critical way is to affirm them for what they are and for what they can become.

Have any of you ever taken the time to think about how you define yourself individually, or as a race of people? Who are you, and what would you say if you were asked? We know without much thought which group is stereotyped as “smart,” and the group that’s typically described to be “good with money,” or the group that’s described as the “hard-working” group. It’s been said that “many African-Americans have a challenging, if not impossible time summarizing our collective experience into one positive statement of group worth.” Don’t for one minute think that it’s always “them” who is trying to keep you down and having you maintain a negative opinion of yourself. At times our own family and friends can be our own worst critics. Why is this and how can you turn these put downs into lift ups? Let me try to explain.

We all know that Yale opens doors. It’s an amazing, even magical place, and your life changed the moment you were accepted into this university. The fact that you were accepted into one of the most prestigious institutions in the world can never be taken away from you. The manner in which you make the most of the education you’re receiving rests solely on you.

Like it or not, among your family, friends and acquaintances, your association with Yale places you in a different category, sometimes positively, and on occasion, negatively. In the position you are in as a “Yale” student, it is tempting to minimize yourself in the world, especially when you are among those that have not been presented the opportunities that you’ve been presented. I can guarantee that there have been times when you’ve gone home, you’ve run into people you haven’t seen in a

while (at the barbershop, at a high school sporting event, or even at church), who'll approach you and try to size you up. You may even get the proverbial, and oft-times condescending-sounding, "You've changed." When folks tell you this, the natural thing to do is to counter their statement by saying, "No I haven't. I'm still the same person you knew in high school—or when we were growing up, or when I worked for you, or whatever the case may be. Many of us will go to great lengths to prove we haven't changed by doing or saying things that we'd never consider doing or saying anywhere else. We sometimes go out of our way to convince people that the experience of getting a world-class education and earning a degree couldn't possibly have had any impact on our lives.

Have you ever considered agreeing with people who try to put you down in this way? Believe it or not, you *have* changed. You should acknowledge that you've grown as a person and that you are different than you were before (not better, but different in a better way). Be able to explain why you've changed in a way that encourages the people who might attempt to bring you down. Your ability to pull people up with you must be greater than their ability to keep you down.

Society would have us believe that all black men do is hang out on the block, drink forties and run after the shawties. Sure that's the lifestyle of some, but we all know that for every one that is doing that, there are those of us who are grinding it out every day, trying to be the best that we can be. What I have observed as a problem that we need to work on is this: For those of us on the positive side of success, we are not always willing to help

our fellow brother who's positively trying to make his mark in the world. There is a tendency among us to not always want to help another brother, because we don't want another brother to pose a threat to us. We must rid ourselves of insecurities that keep us from being our best and from pulling up others who are motivated to achieve.

At every turn in your life, there sometimes will be challenges, uphill battles, and struggles when people try to make you believe you don't belong, and will sometimes do things to you that will make you want to slap the "you know what" out of them. I know I've had several of these challenges. Let me share one with you. Some of you may have heard this story before, but it's so poignant, I see no harm in telling it again. It very well could happen to you.

Will Taylor, the bartender, left me at the bar, because he had to go to the bathroom. I waited for him to return, because I wanted to spend time catching up with him. That weekend, I had returned to my alma mater to attend a Board of Trustee meeting.

I was in my second year as a member of the Board, and I'd recently been convinced by the Chancellor to serve a three year appointment as Chair of the Enrollment Committee, a large committee that oversees both graduate and undergraduate admissions and financial aid.

Will was an old friend of mine that worked as a cook in the dining hall when I was an undergraduate student. I became friends with his entire family, and as one of the few African-

American students at my undergraduate university, I often was invited to have dinner with the Taylor family.

“Will you mix me a bourbon and coke?” asked a man, obviously another Board of Trustee member, who’d walked up to the bar as I waited for Will to return. I didn’t understand why he’d asked me to mix a drink for him, and at the same time, I didn’t want to believe what was happening. I’d never mixed a bourbon and coke, but I thought, “What the heck,” so I proceeded to walk behind the bar and make a drink for him. As I prepared his drink, the fellow Trustee member made small talk with the other Trustees who’d assembled near the bar. He said little else to me.

Once I’d mixed his drink, I handed it to him. He tasted it, approvingly, handed me a \$5.00 bill and walked away.

I held the money in my hand, realizing that what I had believed a few moments earlier was actually true—this man believed I was the bartender!

I placed the money in the tip jar and quietly considered what had just happened to me. Surely, I surmised, this man’s actions were a simple error of mistaken identity. On the other hand, I WAS wearing a suit and tie (not typical bartender’s clothes), I was not a new member on the Board, and I also had attended Trustee receptions of this sort in the past. Yes, I convinced myself, it must have been an honest mistake.

I hadn’t moved from behind the bar when another man approached me. “Will you mix bourbon and coke for me just

like you did for my fellow Trustee?" I stared a little harder this time, but I poured him a bourbon and coke, just like I had for the first man. I handed it to him. He tasted it, and with a slight nod of his head and a tilt of his glass in my direction to show his approval, he handed me a \$10.00 bill, not to be outdone by his wealthy friend.

My friend Will Taylor finally returned from his bathroom break, and I told him what happened. We laughed about it, but we both knew how this story would play out.

The next day, each Board committee Chair was required to give a formal report on the status of the College. This was my first year as Chair, so I was pretty nervous about giving my first report. I wanted to do well. After all, I had been appointed by the Chancellor to oversee the largest and the most active Board of Trustee committees.

When I was called to speak, I stood up from the back of the room, and headed toward the podium. Have you ever had that eerie feeling that every eye was looking at you? I did, and I also could hear a few whispers from the crowd of white men.

As I approached the podium and looked over the audience, it was quite obvious that most of the Trustees in the room were surprised to see an African-American man chairing a Trustee committee, let alone being a member of the Board of Trustees. Most of the members only knew me by name, through email; most of them didn't know I was an intelligent, proud, and capable black man.

Needless to say, I spoke with authority and asserted that I belonged on the stage. I didn't apologize for the confidence that I exuded. When I finished, I returned to my seat, with a roomful of eyes following me there.

What did I take from this experience? I learned a lot about being stereotyped and placed in a box. It wasn't enough that I was adorned in a suit and a tie at this event. Initially, I wasn't even positioned behind the bar. I just happened to be near it, and since I didn't look like the rest of the room of white men, then I simply had to be the bartender.

I also learned that snapping or losing my cool in these instances isn't always the best education for those that need the lesson. I easily could have said, pour your own damn drink, who the hell you think I am? But I didn't.

In this instance, the simple, subtle, and refined gesture of walking to podium in a room filled with privilege and wealth and giving a report was all that it took to make a resounding point. I had the floor, and they had to listen!

There always is a proper and sometimes poetic way to gain respect AND to get someone's attention.

It doesn't matter the situation, for every Goliath in your life, there is a stone. For every arrogant colleague or peer that's trying to undermine your authority, there is a stone. When someone snubs you, there is a stone. When blame is thrown your way unfairly, there is a stone. And for those of you who

have been watching the news lately, if ever the governor of Arizona points her finger in your face, remember, there is a stone (Arizona Governor Jan Brewer). It's up to you to find the most harmless and clever way to throw it. This is—and will be an essential tool for you to have in your arsenal for the rest of your lives.

To become a person who truly seeks and values excellence, you should always proceed with integrity and honor, but you also have to be willing to do whatever it takes to achieve it. Being a person who wants to achieve excellence demands focus, it demands a willingness to, at times, give up something to get what you want.

When I was in training, years ago, I'd often hear personal development experts say that there are basically two of your possessions that you can examine to be able to determine what it is that you value. These items are your daily calendar and your bank statement or credit card statement. The degree of excellence you achieved, they said, was directly associated with the information you'd find in these two items.

Take your daily calendar, for example. What did you do last year? Who did you meet with who could mentor you and help you advance your ambitions? What future appointments have you made? If you look at your daily calendar, do the appointments show that you are working on you? Does it give any indication that you are planning for your future?

What about your bank or credit card statement? Now I know that most of you may not have a lot of money right now, but once you graduate, we expect that you'll be employed and will earn a salary. Still, even now, with the few dollars that you might have, excluding necessary items that you must purchase, like toiletries and other basic items, what else are you spending your money on? Where are you spending your money? It is clear that people spend money on things that they value. Will any of your money be invested in you?

Let me give you a true example. I have a very close relative who has a decent job, works hard, and is looking for opportunities to improve his life. There is nothing wrong with that and I applaud him for that. But he's always complained about not ever having enough money to do this or that, or he'll say, I need a better car, because this old thing is about to fall apart.

Recently, his employer helped him return to school to take a few courses, so he could qualify for a promotion. He completed the coursework, but he was responsible for paying for the exam that would give him the necessary certification that was required for promotion. The examination fee was a reasonable sum for an exam of this kind; less than \$150.00, and certainly worth the investment, since having this certification would make him eligible for a nice bonus. Again, I heard him complaining that he didn't have any money to pay for the exam. All the while, as a Facebook friend of his, I constantly read his posts about how

much fun he had at the club, or that he'd taken a weekend trip with the guys, or that he'd bought the latest electronic gadget. So as I'm hearing him complain, I finally asked him what he valued. Do you value taking the exam, or do you value spending your money at the club? Do you value taking weekend trips with the fellows, or do you want a new car? Which is it? Are you going to invest in yourself with your hard-earned money, or you going to give it to someone else?

At the conscious level we talk about what we want, and we even go as far as to create a list of our goals. I'm going to lose weight. I'm going to write a book. I'm going to run a marathon. That's all good, but what measures have you taken to lose weight, to write a book, or to run a marathon. The will to do it is more important than talking about it.

Phil Cheechio (Cicio), who is a personal and professional development coach, says it better. He says, "The wants and desires that you have are only at the conscious level, and until what you want is deeply rooted into your subconscious mind and becomes something you believe in, you rarely ever will do whatever is necessary to achieve what it is that you want to achieve." I believe that this is something we all need to think about.

I've always been interested in subjects that deal with the power of the subconscious, and of the mind. In the late eighties, I accepted my first position in college administration. I was hired

to create a minority recruiting program at my alma mater. It was a large task, because there had only been a handful of black students who'd attended and graduated from my alma mater, and I was one of them. We truly were pioneers at this predominantly white school. A year after my hiring, the University received a large grant and the new, more progressive University President decided to create a Bridge Program for promising high school students from the inner city, where they would spend the summer on our campus to take courses and to prepare for college. These were students whose opportunity to attend college was severely threatened due to their home and family circumstances. I was asked to direct the Personal Development Program, something I knew nothing about doing. I was motivated to succeed because I knew it was a wonderful opportunity to impact the lives of these young students. I met with several Professional Development consultants who gave me a lot of books to read and workshop ideas, and after many hours of planning, I was ready to facilitate my first workshop with 36 eager African-American high school students.

During each year of the program, I selected an inspiring quotation for the students to recite at the start and conclusion of each daily session. These affirmations were chosen to motivate and uplift the students. The first year's quote was:

*Beauty am I
Sprit am I
I am the infinite within my Soul
I can find no Beginning
I can find no End
All this I am*

By the second year, I'd left my regular job to begin graduate school. During the summer, between my first and second year of graduate school, I returned to run the Personal Development sessions, which now had two classes of students, totaling 72 students.

I was better prepared to conduct these sessions, and this time, I'd discovered an affirmation for the students to learn that I'd found on the wall in my graduate school field placement director's office. This quote affected me the very first time I read it. Though I didn't quite understand the fullness of its meaning at the time, I knew I wanted to use it, because I believed that the more I recited it, the more meaning it would have. Twenty two years later, it's a creed that I have found essential in both my personal and professional life. It encouraged me to break free from ignorance and set me free from possible limitations I held in my mind. A great sense of infinite power, potential, and hope surfaced in me, and I realized that there are no boundaries to what I can accomplish. I also believe this is true for each of you.

The affirmation is called, My Mind is a Center of Divine Operation, and it was written by 19th century author, Judge, and student of mental science, Thomas Troward. I'd like to share it with you.

My mind is a center of Divine operation. The Divine operation is always for expansion and fuller expression, and this means the production of something beyond what has gone before,

something entirely new, not included in past experience, though proceeding out of it by orderly sequence of growth

Therefore, since the Divine cannot change its inherent nature, it must operate in the same manner in me; consequently in my own special world, in which I am the center, it will move forward to produce new conditions, always in advance of any that have gone before.

So, as I close, I encourage you to produce new and better conditions, at Yale, back home, and wherever your journey takes you. Bettering yourselves and aiming for excellence demands a concentrated focus on the conditions surrounding you. I am so proud of each of you. I can't wait to see what life has in store. Thank you.

Sources:

- National Center for Education Statistics, March 2011 for scholastic year 2009.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics: Prison and Inmates, 2009—2010
- United States Census Bureau: American Community Survey, October 2009.

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(674,000 in College/164,400 Incarcerates).

6.3% of Black males are enrolling in College at a higher rate, 5.8% of White males, 4.7% of Latino males, and 9.7% of Asian males.