



A Narrative on Teaching, Community, and Activism

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In "A Narrative of Teaching, Community, and Activism," youth minister, Tim Lee, narrates his journey towards establishing a literacy program dedicated to the personal and spiritual development of young black men. In addition to spiritual advisement and critical dialogue, his program exposes young men to prominent black thinkers such as Langston Hughes, Etheridge Knight, Malcolm X, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. This community-based initiative is dedicated to the development of a community literacy specific and, as Lee sees it, necessary, for the successful development of the black male youth in Chicago and beyond.

One Black Man: A Narrative on Teaching, Community, and Activism

I was excited when invited to talk about my organization, *One Black Man*, for this special issue on *African American Contributions to Community Literacy*. Although I do not consider myself a scholar in the traditional sense and while I did not think of *One Black Man* as a literacy program, I believe its evolution as a form of informal education that has been vital to the Black community does make it a contribution to African American Community literacy. Much of my own education was supplemented by experiences outside of formal schooling, experiences communing with others at church services, engaging in informal conversations in kitchens with my family, or just fellowshiping with my peers in dorm rooms after class. *One Black Man* is the culmination



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of these experiences tied to a formal program devoted to young, urban, minority males. As a Black male I know all too well the social divisions and disciplinary practices within formal educational institutions that affect already bruised psyches. While I never fully believed that being Black was as bad as it is sometimes presented in America, it is hard not to dismiss all of the subliminal messages that are sent in so many forms every day. I want to first review the experiences that have led me to form *One Black Man*, because I believe they are educative in themselves and present an argument for more community education driven programs, and because they are illustrative of a tradition of African American community literacy that I have only recently become formally aware of. Second, I want to provide an overview of my program and its potential as a type of community classroom important to the formal and informal development of black male youth. I end with an outline of *One Black Man*'s directives and my vision for the program.



I remember my personal experiences struggling with my identity and race pride as a youth. If I am honest, I was thoroughly brainwashed into believing that the differences that existed between me and my white counterparts made me less of a student and even less as of a human being. I recall an instance when I was in kindergarten writing on the chalkboard during playtime. A child and I were playing teacher and we had to write the word “kindergarten.” She spelled the last part of the word with a “d” (kindergarden), a common mistake, and I spelled it with a “t,” the correct way. When she saw mine, she told me I was wrong and told me to correct it. I remember thinking it was right and tried to stand my ground. But when she suggested that the teacher decide, I cowardly changed my “t” to a “d”. Little did I know, the teacher was watching our interaction the whole time and came by and corrected us. I remember feeling ashamed for not trusting myself. If I am honest, I think I believed her being white made her right. Observing the actions and behaviors of Black boys over the years, I have noticed a similar trend. Just about all of the trouble they get into is in some way connected to the fact that they don’t feel good about who they are. My thinking has been: If I show them who they can be and they are able to see it, their behavior won’t be the only thing to change. I believe their *lives* will change.

I always knew I wanted to give back to the community, to make a difference in the lives of Black Americans. Growing up, I was inspired by a cadre of Black role models who, in different ways, contributed to my social and scholastic development—not with tests, homework assignments, or research papers; but with conversations, advice, and encouragement. One Black Man began as an idea of paying forward the communal encouragement I received by engaging troubled young black males. Ironically, I chose the name of One Black Man, not because I believe I alone can change the woeful statistics regarding Black male incarceration and graduation rates. Instead, I chose the name because I believe it’s imperative that individuals begin to engage and influence the lives of young black males as best they can, whether one at a time or as a mass collective.



As an undergraduate at Hampton University, I initiated a Men's Conference that was designed to prepare the men of Hampton to be mentors to middle school students in the Hampton Roads area. The idea came to me the summer I was researching minority youth in the public education system as a Ronald McNair Scholar. As I was reading *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Males* by Jwanza Kunjufu, I ran across a line that I would never forget: "In order to be a man, you must see a man" (48). I became aware of a simple problem with a simple solution. I figured that part of my own success as a minority was related to the influence and role members of my community played in my life. I believed if there were more positive role-models, people who listened and believed in the potential of Black male youth then perhaps they would stand a greater chance of attaining success. The Men's Conference was to begin in September of 2003. The support I received was overwhelmingly surprising. Not only were large numbers of male students from freshmen to seniors interested in attending the sessions, many expressed an interest in helping to plan, promote, and even financially support the efforts to make a difference in the Hampton Community. The conference overall was a success. We had 5 workshops throughout the 2003-2004 academic school year, which culminated with a visit to a local middle school and a juvenile detention center. The information we imparted was received by the younger boys and the adults were impressed with the number of black men who were interested in being mentors in their facilities. This experience made a deep imprint on my mind.

While it would be years before I could put together more seminars and activities, my interest in helping young black males articulate their own vision of success remained steadfast. During seminary, my roommate and I started a "lunch bunch," or informal lunch meetings where we provided food, for boys in the 5th grade to encourage a space for dialogue about life and to ensure that they were getting enough to eat on a regular basis. From November to the end of the 2005-2006 academic school year we visited the school every Monday and bought pizza for all the



Tim Lee Speaking

boys in the 5th grade. We fed them and spoke to them about their behavior, their future plans, our stories, and any other topics the teachers and principals wanted us to address. This experience was rewarding because I saw how elementary school-aged boys responded to the ideas and information I presented. It was a very positive response. In fact, I was encouraged to substitute teach and became a teacher in demand during the next two years.

During my last year of the seminary graduate program, I submitted a proposal to do an independent study. I wanted to again work with and engage young black

males. After having worked with Black boys from underprivileged backgrounds, I observed another simple problem with another simple solution. I wanted to build a program that taught self-esteem and self-discipline to Black boys who had difficulty controlling themselves. I put together a curriculum that included fasts from food, television, and other electronic devices. I suggested alternative activities for them to entertain themselves and mandated participants to keep a journal. Although I received a good grade on the assignment, the comments from my professor let me know that the expectations were too unrealistic and that I should reconsider the components of the program. I can see now



Tim Lee working with youth during One Black Man workshop

how such a program prescribed for them activities they had not chosen for themselves.

After I graduated from seminary, I moved to Chicago. I knew no one. During my time alone, I began to think about what direction I wanted my life to go. As I reflected over what I had done and accomplished over the last two stages of my life, I came back to the thread of instilling self-esteem and self-discipline in a generation of Black boys who desperately needed direction. It was at this time that I began fashioning *One Black Man*. I used all of my experiences to develop the purpose, mission, and vision statements, and the goals I wanted to accomplish with the organization. After hearing about Derrion Albert's death in 2009¹, I decided that I had waited long enough to launch a pilot. I went to the Youth Peace Center in Roseland, one of the worst neighborhoods in Chicago, to implement some of the workshops as a pilot.



My first seminar for *One Black Man* was very spontaneous. I arrived at the center to observe, but found out that a presenter did not show up. I was asked to facilitate a conversation with the young men about manhood. Without any preparation and no reputation built among the young men, I sat down in a chair in a circle formation and asked the guys if they thought there was a difference between boys and men. After each person answered the question, I remember asking whether they thought there was a difference between men and women, and then finally black men and white men. The conversation was magical. No one was expecting it to go over so well. The center had many problems with the group of guys respecting presenters but they had no incidents the day I was there. In fact, I later learned the guys were asking about my return and were excited to sit in another *One Black Man* workshop.

From this first experience, I learned that I had what I needed inside of me to affect the kind of change I thought young black youth of my community needed. Though I believe in being prepared, I know there is such a thing as over-preparation. I learned that I had to facilitate learning and not just teach what I thought I knew. Students are more interested in thinking for themselves than being spoon fed information in an arrogant and inconsiderate fashion.

The next workshop I presented was based on Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. I used a quotation in the introduction of the book to begin a discussion about critical thinking and the necessity for the Black man to control his own thoughts. I asked the young men participating in the workshop to interpret a quotation and write what they thought it meant. It did not go over as smoothly as I thought it would, but the things I learned about the experiences of inner city Black males were profound. One student, for instance, disrespectfully walked out as I was passing out the sheets. I later learned that he could neither read nor write; but instead of risking discovery, he removed himself from the room. While I was happy that the rest of the young men stayed to participate, I was discouraged to see the young man opt out of an opportunity for



self-development. I still struggle with this reality far too often. While I do believe it takes more than one initiative to reach a variety of bruised, embarrassed, and developing youth identities, I believe one thing that damages any interaction with these young males is the inability of adults to listen and respond to these youth without overly chastising them for their perceived deficiencies. Thus, I spend most of my lessons developing a culture of dialogue, which means I ask to be listened to and I listen to them in order to teach them how to listen and how to be heard. I ask them to write journals on their ideas and then to share them with the group. I respond to them not as a teacher, but as an adult who may know more than them in some areas but who is also willing to learn from them and listen to them. From this meeting I learned that there is a thirst for the information I shared. After the session, many of the young men came to me and told me about how they wished information like what I offered was offered in the schools they were attending. I believe that the absence of such information often leads to behavior problems and an unhealthy discontentment with school, which when left to fester too long explodes into fights and arguments among these boys.

The vision of *One Black Man* is to influence the next generation of Black male leaders by reshaping consciousness, transforming thoughts, and impressing culture. I am often reminded of the communal education practiced in slavery. Literate slaves saw a power in the ability to read, but also in an ability to interpret and discuss published writings, namely the Bible. Many of these literate slaves formed groups that taught one another not only how to read but how to reinterpret the Bible so that it led to mental emancipation that in some cases led to physical freedom (Douglass 76). While I am not suggesting the conditions of these young boys is as tragic as slavery, I do believe that education is a communal activity, one that requires local and specific conversations not just about proper grammar and advance mathematics, but also about the very experiences and habits that will contribute to their resistance, independence, and oral articulations. Birthed out of a personal desire to be a part of the solution, *One Black Man* is purposed to increase



Tim Lee Leading a One Black Man sponsored workshop

the self-awareness in Black boys so they can grow to be confident and secure Black men who have the ability to competently and accurately perform, independently and critically think, and unashamedly and unapologetically be.

Confidence, communication skills, critical thinking skills and relationship building are the focus of my workshops. Black History is used to instill confidence, spark critical thought, and build relationships. This formula increases self-esteem because race-awareness increases race-esteem, and race-esteem increases self-esteem. Making lessons in Black History a central feature of this pedagogy also address the shortcomings of the American Education System, which has failed our Black boys.

As a leadership consulting firm, *One Black Man* merges mentoring, leadership training, character building, and Black History into a



curriculum for civic-minded community activists willing to pay their own experiences forward. We intend to accomplish this by facilitating a series of workshops where participants are enlightened, encouraged, and inspired. One Black Man accomplishes its mission by utilizing *7 Tiers of Leadership*. With each tier, the participant moves from the superficial to the philosophical—from the surface to the root. Participants move from learning about others to intimately learning about themselves (inside and out). After they intimately know themselves, knowledge of the other is reinforced, bringing them full circle; ending at a point higher than where they began.

Each tier correlates to a period or lesson in African American History.

7 Tiers of Leadership

- Perception
- Reality
- Presentation
- Validation
- Action
- Morality
- Spirituality

It is immensely important that the young men who participate in the programs of *One Black Man* will be provided information that will inspire them, but it is just as important (if not more important) that they will learn about their inner selves and look at themselves in a way that is higher than previously. This happens many times when a person speaks positively into the lives of another person. When I was in the eighth grade, for example, I remember a guidance counselor inviting me to her office. After pretending as if I was being expelled for something “She knew I did” she let me know that she was just joking. Although it took me some time and many tissues to gather myself, she eventually told me that she was nominating me for an award. Each school, she explained, could nominate one person to receive the award and she selected me. I



don't know if she knew what affect this would have on me, but it was tremendous. I think that I see the impact only after years have passed and my level of maturity has increased.

Some people may not believe that this is important, but images perpetuated in the media make it so that it is difficult to see the good in Black men. I sincerely believe that this vision will benefit the nation. I intend to make this happen by building a core team of leaders who will be trained to reach and teach their peers. The curriculum includes but is not limited to philosophies of manhood, education, music, technology, sex, drugs, and spirituality. The idea behind *One Black Man* is to instill in each of the brothers the idea that they can become *One Black Man* who will make a difference and change the world.

Not too long ago, I got heavily involved with the Rainbow PUSH Coalition with Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. Unfortunately, I was so involved with helping to build the momentum in that organization by attracting people from my generation that I put my efforts of *One Black Man* to the side. As I look back over that experience, I see the need for newer approaches to reaching youth and engaging in social issues. I am redirecting the energy I was putting into mobilizing youth and young adults for PUSH into *One Black Man*. I am excited to see fruit from the efforts because I am doing what inspired me, much like the heroes I admire. In other words, instead of talking about what needs to be done with other adults, people need to actually do something with the youth we claim to be helping. The church and other social organizations have failed to maintain the enthusiasm in the upcoming generations. I think that people from my generation and newer ones can create something fresh and capture the interest and dedication of those who the church and other civil rights organizations have not attracted. *One Black Man* has this potential and this keeps me motivated.

I have been asked from time to time whether or not *One Black Man* has workshops for people outside the demographic I target. As it stands now,



I do not have plans to focus on any group other than young black males. As a matter of fact there have been a number of engagements I have lost because of the alleged discriminatory practice of targeting only Black boys. While I believe the idea of community extends far beyond racial or gender demographics my thinking is clear: Black male youth represent a significant population which I already struggle to engage. While in the future I would be happy to work with other demographic groups experiencing similar problems, as of right now I believe it is important to remain local and focused, and not large and ambiguous.

In most cases, the government continues to fail to remedy the problems of young black males; the educational system, the court system, and even the church also continue to fail them, thus, they remain my most pressing concern. As I have matured, I have come to understand that it is not the responsibility of any of these entities to prepare black male youth for their futures. If the community doesn't step up, nobody will. *One Black Man* is such an effort. To reiterate, the people who are impacted by the problems must be the people who address the problem. It doesn't matter how many programs or ideas that other people have to bridge educational, technological, and other divides, nothing will work until we develop and implement a plan ourselves. Malcolm X said it this way: "I for one believe that if you give a people a thorough understanding of what confronts them and a basic cause of it, they'll create their own program, and when the people create a program, you get action."

There are a number of organizations that use sports/ athletics and entertainment to get the attention of young minority males; however, an injustice is done when those activities become false or narrow gateways out of a community. Instead, I believe more can be achieved through the philosophical and intellectual development of these youth, and that even more can be achieved by helping them to build up their own surroundings; not escape them. Rather than simply find ways out of the "ghetto," what might it mean to discover ways to rebuild or reinvigorate the communities these youth come from? Although I understand this



is somewhat of a utopian ideal, I still believe that the possibilities for change exist in the people, in their conversations, and in their day-to-day choices which will in turn help them to believe in themselves and to believe in the abilities of individuals in their community. One method of increasing the self-esteem of Black male youth is to introduce them to the literary works of Black writers. Drawing on the Black American tradition of community literacy I try to inspire these boys through readings and writings that speak of a long cultural tradition of struggle and personal development. One of the aims of *One Black Man* is to foster in the participants an appreciation for Black History. This cannot be done without the poetry, writings, and essays of prominent Black thinkers such as Langston Hughes, Etheridge Knight, Booker T. Washington, Malcolm X, Paul Laurence Dunbar and others.

The young men who have participated in the program have responded well. Some of the participants have even taken the information and used it when they had opportunities to make formal presentations. This interest indicates a level of success on the part of the workshops. It is more challenging to document how the young people are exhibiting growth since our efforts to transform their lives is still ongoing. As it is in ministry, there is a buffer of time between the sowing and the growing of a seed. I am confident, however, that the seeds have been planted in fertile ground. They will grow. They must. If we are to see a change in the statistics that have been bombarding the airwaves, we must do everything in our power to make sure they grow.

If you are familiar with the Black urban populace of Chicago, the current base of *One Black Man*, than you know I have purposely elided some of the more painful statistics about inner-city Black youth. I have not provided the astounding and disheartening statistics that are often linked to inner-city Black males for a few reasons. First, statistics are no longer surprising. Where they used to propel people to act, now they cause people to shake their heads with a profound sense of hopelessness and



pity, and carry on with their lives. Many have become numb to the notion that America is losing an entire generation of youth.

Second, such statistics ignore the serious community initiatives that are taking place by individuals on a regular basis. Outside of after school programs there are ministers, dedicated college students, and invested community workers who are changing youth's lives every day. We need to think of these resources as complements and supplements to the formal education these boys receive. This means that educators, parents, and community leaders should think diligently about how they can create partnerships that improve, not confuse, these young men.

Third and last, although at times useful, these statistics have become a decontextualized form of data for giving reasons not to support minority youth. I believe a central and often forgotten aspect of community literacy is faith. This is probably an expected response from a youth minister and seminary graduate; however, faith is a force that continues dialogue and effort long after statistics have left their mark. It is with faith that I have described my own journey and experiences teaching and working in multiple communities, it is with faith that I continue to develop a curriculum for classrooms outside of formal schools, and it is with faith that I continue to assert that community begins with individuals and that individuals can only discover themselves within a community. *One Black Man* is my attempt at fostering, maintaining, and expanding how education occurs within my community.



Endnotes

- 1 Derrion Albert is a Chicago youth brutally beaten to death when caught in a brawl between two student factions. His beating was caught on tape and broadcast on local news station WFLD.

Works Cited

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