



**BEING FATHERS AND MEN:
RAISING UP AND RIGHTFUL PRACTICE**

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Being fathers like the fight for freedom is no light work or easy walk in the world. Indeed, for us as Black men, fatherhood is a combined, long, difficult and demanding struggle to be duly respected as men, highly regarded as partners, and greatly valued as parents. And it is also to honor our ethical obligation to bring, sustain and increase good in the world and to be a model and leave a legacy worthy of the name and history African. Moreover, more is required to be fathers and men today than in former times and yet often we have less to work with. For too many among us have become fathers in an interrupted and altered tradition of both family and community and thus lack the preparation, proper knowledge and appropriate means and the nurturing relations and supportive situation we once had to aid us. And so, fatherhood becomes, in too many cases, not so much a blessing as a burden, and all involved suffer, especially our children. But in an African sense, fatherhood is a sacred honor and obligation and we practice it not only for the good it gives and brings us, but also for the good of the community and future generations.

It is an irony of history that the oppressed often learn and accept the worst ways of the oppressor. Among the worst of these ways is the vulgar individualism that teaches us to think and act selfishly as if we were alone even though we are clearly linked and live together; to be uncaring except for self in the most narrow sense, to see others as useable objects for one's own ends and to wreck people's lives and then seem surprised when Iraq-like consequences come back to haunt us. Thus, if we are not morally conscious and considerate, we can start families without preparation or the proper foundations, see sex solely for recreation

and self-satisfaction, and be unready and unwilling to accept responsibility for the consequences of our quick and convenient coupling.

To be a good or excellent father, we must be African men at our best, mentally mature, morally and spiritually grounded, deeply embedded in our own culture, ever sensitive to our children and our partner, their mother, and properly prepared for any task or assignment we assume or are given. Clearly, the problem of adolescent boys' becoming fathers is a serious one. For they lack the mental and moral maturity and the material means, even if physically they can have sex and inseminate an egg. Indeed, the simple donation of sperm is best done at a sperm bank and in any case, doesn't make a father in a real sense, whether adolescent or adult. That is why it's so important to counsel adolescents against becoming an accidental or intentional "father" without preparation or promise. And the same advice is good for adults who have no commitment to the potential mother or have no interest in caring for or even claiming a future child.

Adolescent fathers, however, are increasingly becoming a major challenge to their families and the community, for not only do they often bring into being children they don't want or can't care for, they also help produce the adolescent mother who is similarly unprepared for parenthood and often unwilling to accept it. Thus, there is an ever-increasing need for older men to stand up, step forward and be men and mentors for the young which the best of our tradition calls for and compels. It is on us, the older and elder ones to model and mentor, to make a compelling case for responsible sexual and social behavior, preparation for rightful male/female relations and righteous

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fatherhood, and to be a worthy member of family and community. But this requires the older men to be the models they teach in a meaningful way, to be present and prepared, conscious, committed and capable African men in or on the way to relationships that reflect the life lessons they teach.

Surely this situation is made worst and its solution more difficult by the context in which we find ourselves. Again, it is important to remember we are in the US of A, and all around us there is a clear erosion of mutual commitment of men and women in the larger society not only to family formation, but also to each other in any form at all. There is also simultaneously a decline in marriage and a rise in divorce and cohabitation or just couplings for sexual or social convenience. Moreover, young men and women, but more so men, are becoming increasingly more materialistic, valuing the acquisition of various consumer items for flash and as the foundational formation of their identities and aspirations. Therefore, they have no qualms or questions about spending more on themselves than their families or children, and consider it in typical market-induced fashion to be act of "rational" self-interest.

The situation we find ourselves in is a complex one and defined not only by the sickness of society and the heightened vulnerability too many of us have to its most

detrimental views and values. It is also complicated by the fact that there are fathers who would, if they could; come if they can; give if they've got; and suffer greatly from their inability to be the fathers and men they want and ought to be. Here too we who are conscious, capable and committed must help them also to stand-up, man-up and stay-up on the battlefield for a better world.

As we said in the *Million Man March/Day of Absence Mission Statement*, we Black men, present and future fathers, must stand up in the spirit and special meaning of that historical march, and declare again to ourselves and others, "our commitment to assume a new and expanded responsibility" to raise up the fallen brothers, foster, strengthen and support the responsible and caring father, build quality male/female relationships and create the just and good society and world we all want and deserve. And we must be aware that "we make this commitment in an era in which this is needed as never before and in which we cannot morally choose otherwise." It is in this context that we conclude saying, "that unless and until Black men stand up, Black men and women cannot stand together and accomplish the awesome tasks before us." And that task is not just to build and strengthen male/female relations and families, but also to forge a new future in which we all can flourish.