



Improving the bottom  
... line through people

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## Out of the Abyss: Rituals to Nurture Black Manhood

Stepping out of the dorm into a mid-November night, I shuddered as a blast of frigid air hit my face. Winter was not officially here, but it wasn't far off. At that moment, it felt like it had arrived early in Ohio. Though no snow is on the ground, there is a peaceful silence in the air and a stillness all around. At just 6:50 p.m., it is already pitch black out and the view of the horseshoe campus circle looks lifeless; empty, devoid of humanity. Nobody is stirring outside. No one is walking, or driving. No one except us, and the "Us" includes my nine line-brothers and myself.

Momentarily, we huddle atop the brick steps before we walk past the dorm, beyond the campus circle, and traverse the soft slope down Brush Row Road. It's a 150-yards to the frat house. Every weekday night, we have frat business. Our "big brothers" expect us there at 7 p.m. prompt; no absences, no excuses, no exceptions.

My knit hat, navy pea coat, blue jeans and leather gloves protect me from the night air, but it's not the cold that I seek sanctuary from. It's the fear and anxiety that swells in my stomach and spikes each time we'd turn this corner and descend the hill.

I never vocalized those fears aloud. If my line brothers held the same trepidations, it was



never shared. While it was always in the background, our fears remained unsaid, unspoken, and unexpressed as we descended the hill together toward the frat house.

Having pledged with my brothers for six months, I sensed each had his private version of my fears. Unlike today's men's support groups that offer an impetus to speak openly, the fraternity offered a different form for fostering solidarity. Black men would seldom speak of their

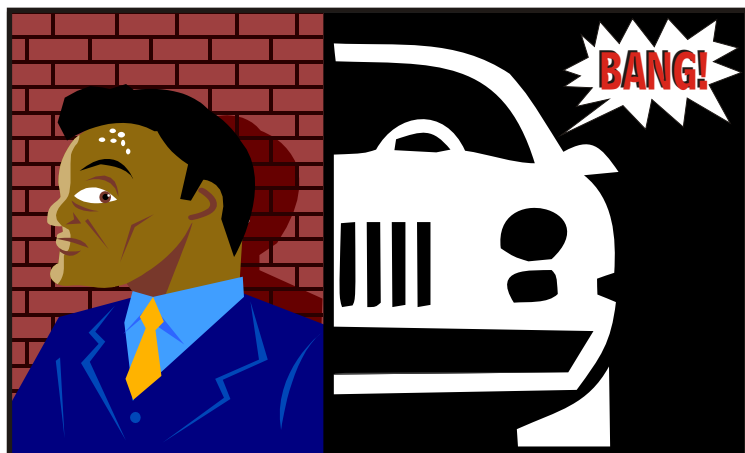
feelings then, and attaining manhood -- the fraternity's first cardinal principle -- meant to project strength and not succumb to weakness. The big brothers would often invoke us to, "Be strong!"

It wasn't so much what would happen to us at the frat house that would raise my anxiety level as much as the anticipation. Truthfully, it was both. The descent down hill, between the dorm and frat house, was where most of what I feared, real or

# Surviving "Drive-Bys": Lessons from My First Day at School

*The muffled rumble of a jet engine at 20,000 feet had reduced me to a slumbering baby in my window seat. Rarely do I find comfort in seats designed for bodies over six-feet tall. I'm on the second leg of my originating flight from Cleveland, to the Iron City, Birmingham. The commuter hop from Atlanta can't be more than 30 minutes.*

Still, I'm feeling groggy, and dream like images are racing through my head. Like the news flashes in Oliver Stone's popular movie on JFK, I picture reel after reel of black and white images from the civil rights era unwind in my mind. On one street, I see the clean-shaven, stern-looking, pink faces with short-cropped haircuts. These are the official guards, the policeman of the Jim Crow era, armed to a tee with guns, dogs, fire hoses and Billy clubs. Behind them surge hundreds of more pink faces, shouting obscenities and making threatening gestures with their middle fingers. Across the street, there are mostly black and brown faces with a smattering of pink ones. They march through the street in unison. Clad in dark suits, white shirts, and pencil thin ties, they carry placards with words scrawled on the white oak tag proclaiming: "We shall overcome," and "I'm a man." These



compelling slogans remind me of a time not so long ago. As much as I try, I can't push these shadowy images out of the bowels of my memory. They stay with me.

Having grown up in New York and lived up North for my adult life, the South, and particularly Birmingham, resurfaces uncomfortable memories of an uncomfortable time in American history. So even though the year is 1979, nearly

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imagined, became present for me. My guess is that it had been there all along, but it didn't get distinguished until I confronted it on the slope. I was beginning to see my own fears and deal with them, not only in pledging the frat, but in life also.

Many of my good friends on campus (HBCU) refused to pledge. They perceived it as an unnecessary evil of socializing, especially in an era of black consciousness. It wasn't uncommon to hear them say that they preferred to be "...independent, unattached and uncommitted."

Yet, what they missed was experiencing the joy, camaraderie and oneness felt by championship teams overcoming a major obstacle and achieving a victory, not only for the team, but individually. Pledging is one of the few rituals available at the collegiate level that provides a framework for nurturing young black males. Like a military boot camp, pledging called on me to examine myself and assess who I was for me, as well as for my line-brothers. It provided a bright spotlight that shined

on my strengths as well as my weaknesses.

At the time, I didn't realize the fullness of the opportunity I gained by descending the hill each night. In completing the pledge period to become a "big brother," I was also scaling the abyss, climbing up from youth to manhood. Pledging helped me to distinguish many of my fears and that allowed me to flourish as a man.

Rituals, such as pledging, that create opportunities for self examination, can be essential tools in uplifting black youth into manhood. Institutionalized, rituals provide a safe structure for growth. Our communities are crying out for groups and organizations to provide rituals for black youth to traverse the abyss into manhood.

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# Surviving "Drive-Bys": Lessons from My First Day at School

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two decades removed from the highly charged racial tension of the 1960s, even though the news reel flashbacks are of another time and place, the powerful images won't go away.

Within days, I'd be enrolled in one of the southeast's leading graduate programs in health care administration and management. Only a month earlier, I'd flown down to interview with the College's admissions committee and meet with the faculty. I was optimistic, yet guarded about my visit. Never having spent any real time in the Deep South, I wasn't sure that living and going to school there would suit me. I reasoned that having waited until the last minute to complete my application I was at a decided disadvantage. Few reputable programs opt to consider candidates at such a late date and I was thankful UAB did. When they offered me the opportunity to interview at the last minute, I had little to lose.

The School's resident grant writer, program administrator and all round good will ambassador, greeted me at the terminal. He's a Black Ph.D. administrator and his presence made me feel right at home. Now, here's someone that looks like me and brings an understanding of my unique life experiences. As it turns out, he's also a fraternity brother! I felt like a long lost family member recently found. Besides his generous hospitality, I was also taken by the openness of the admission committee as well as the faculty. I hadn't seen this coming. I said to myself there's no reason to believe that this vibrant, thriving, modern metropolis held the archaic beliefs of years past. There's no real decision here. If accepted, count me in.

As the plane made its final descent towards the Iron City, I was awakened from my slumber by the captain's voice over the PA system, informing us that we're on our final approach. For an instant, I glanced out of the port window and then, looked through the cabin for the faces seen during my nap. The commuters, mostly white, appeared like normal, everyday people, just going about their daily business.

In spite of my unexpectedly pleasant experience a month earlier, I was still mentally making preparations for living in the South. Warned by friends and relatives alike, they'd said, "Remember who you are." meaning you're black and living in Birmingham, "The rules are different there, especially for black males." I also thought that if one of these so-and-sos twists their mouths up to make one offensive remark, I'll give 'em a piece of my mind. Yep, I'd put 'em in their place.

But I experienced the opposite in flight. Everyone I made eye contact with was polite and cordial. I couldn't believe it. It is not uncommon for African Americans to have this kind of internal dialogue when confronted, especially in light of America's dark history with race relations. I felt bad

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**I'd been blown away!**

for holding these thoughts and feelings. It seems as though they've changed their assumptions and I must change mine also.

After leaving the plane and making my way through the terminal, my all-around good guy and present-day city

dignitary nabbed me about half way through the terminal. He knew I was coming and had made a point of being at the airport to greet me. After claiming my bags, he taxied me from the airport to my apartment. Absolutely nothing changed! The same warmth I enjoyed less than one full moon ago was still in the air. I was glad to be here. I knew that I'd made the right decision.

I carried what few belongings that I brought with me into the apartment. In less than 24 hours, the first day of school starts. After a six-year academic hiatus, I was excited about enrolling in graduate school. Along with the rest of my personal effects, my car had arrived by rail a few days earlier and was now waiting for me in the lot.

At 7 a.m. the next morning, I hopped into my car, and made the 15-minute dash towards school. With the Medical Center complex close by, parking was at a premium, but I lucked out and found a metered space within walking distance. Now only a few blocks away, my anticipation rose as I begin thinking about this first day. I'm ready.

In less than a 5-minute walk, I'm just 10 feet from the school's front door. Just as I'm reaching for the door handle I suddenly hear tires screeching on the concrete pavement. At first, I thought someone had jammed hard on their brakes to avoid rear-ending another car, but within moments, I'd find out differently.

As I whipped my head around to see what my ears already heard, I saw two middle-aged white men in sports jackets and ties lean their heads and bodies out of a dark, green pickup truck and yell, "Hey! Hey you! Yeah you, boy! Shine my shoes!" And from inside the truck, loud laughter followed. With no hesitation, the driver floors the truck's accelerator and the truck careens up 20<sup>th</sup> Street, burning rubber and fishtailing. Dumfounded, I asked myself, were they talking to me? Nobody else was around ... of course, they were! If this happened today, I'd characterize my experience as a verbal drive-by. I'd been blown away!

My natural instinct was to shout back some equally offensive retort. But between my confusion, the squealing tires and burning rubber, I simultaneously wondered whether any comeback could be heard, much less generate enough of a retort, to justify getting the last word in. No way! They had the first and the last word too, and were now long gone. As quickly as they appeared, their

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motorized carriage had vanished into a cloud of foul smelling white smoke.

Watching as the pick-up disappeared into city traffic a block away, I stood there for what seemed like minutes, though it was probably closer to 10 seconds, trying to make sense of it all. I couldn't and never will. In less than a minute, I had gone from pure excitement and anticipation to shock, to anger, and finally, resignation. And all before I had even gotten into the building or begun classes! My racist radar had been activated and was now on full alert. I detest having to live with this defensive system in place. It leaves me on the edge.

All of these feelings stayed with me much longer than I care to mention. I reminded myself where I was. I rationalized it. What else should I have expected being black and in Birmingham? I should have known better. I had plum forgot!

I'd been called the "N" word before, as a teenager, but it wasn't in the South. Growing up, calling a black man a "boy" was equally as offensive. The experience shook me to the core. I thought, "OK, this is what I'm going to have deal with," but I wasn't all right with it. I thought to myself; get use to it, get over it, or get out of it, "it" being Birmingham. Maybe I was making more of it than I should, but that's how I felt.

My background fears about coming here in the first place rushed into the fore. I chose to leave my full-time job for this? At first, I told myself that it didn't matter, but I immediately put that story to rest. I could chalk this experience up as a run in with a bunch of ignorant yahoos. It's my first day here. And after my own false-positive build up, I am asking myself will I really like this place? Can I survive here? Can I get use to the old order? What did I get myself into?

All of my mental preparations on the flight coming into town couldn't ready me for this. I had had no fear of physical harm or attack since it happened so fast. I was just stunned

by the act and like so many victims, I never uttered a word of the experience to my classmates, especially my friends in the North. I'd never hear the end of it. I could almost hear them saying, "See man? I told you! Come on back home." And all the while they'd be feeling a bit smug for having given me their best personal version of sound advice.

I didn't feel sorry for myself, but holding on to the experience stressed me. For it wasn't the fact of this one "drive-by," but the portent of all the future ones that would be sure to follow. And they did. Any black person who's experienced a drive-by insult knows this well, whether it is acknowledged or not. In your heart, you know that it will happen again, but like an earthquake, you have no idea when it will happen. You either learn to live your life without anticipating the drive-by or you can get characterized as angry, having a chip on your shoulder, or a bad attitude. What most people don't realize is that this is part of the daily encounter. The best seller, "Black Like Me," punctuates this point, even today.

Drive-by insults occur everywhere in life; on the job, with bosses, co-workers, subordinates and even customers. They happen with clerks in grocery or department stores. Sometimes you have to catch yourself or you'd stay mad all the time. If it happens once, it could be an accident, twice portends a pattern, but by the third time, the evidence appears pretty strong.

In light of the fact that you may experience drive-by insults as a routine part of life, what can you do? You have choices. Stay angry and it'll eat a hole in your spirit. Live defensively, and you end up withholding yourself from this life. Or, you can access another way of being.

Here are three prescriptions to survive a drive-by. First, start with the practice of letting go of stressful events. As unpopular as it may sound, reliving the event can induce stress, something all of us can learn to live without. A

meditation practice is a good starting place for letting go of and reducing stress. Second, track drive-by events in your life that subject you to being triggered. Nothing gives you greater access to your higher self than recognizing your personal hot spots. Knowing yourself is the place to begin. And third, find sanctuary. Church has historically been the outlet of choice for many of us. Knowing where sanctuary is for you allows you to be all right with just who you are.

All the leading health indicators paint a bleak picture of the enormous toll racism and race-related stress exacts on blacks. To survive the various drive-by encounters, bromides are available to alleviate the suffering. Your very life may depend on them.

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