



A Time to End Privilege

by **Thandabantu Iverson**

It has been six days since the Million Man March, and I am still trying to sort out what it all really means. In particular, I am wondering what I can say to my little nephew, Wingrove, who at five years old is already acutely aware of things he does not yet understand, and understands things of which we assume he is not aware. How, amidst all the confusion and tendentious "spinning," can I distill some seminal seed to plant in a fertile furrow of his mind?

The raspy hum of the computer becomes more obvious as I momentarily lose focus on the feelings and concerns evoked by my personal experience of an event so deeply moving that I find myself choking with emotion each time I attempt to define its impact. The coffee is not helping . . . Perhaps it will help if I begin to identify the things that I do not want to tell my nephew. I am a bit clearer about them.

This event certainly did not free African-Americans from the vicious and systematic "race" oppression we experience every minute we live -- and die -- in this "land of the free." In fact, the aftermath reveals a certain formidable resilience of racism, which enables many Americans to make assumptions about the Million Man March which have so little to do with African-Americans and so much to do with the continued (and extremely dangerous) denial of whiteness . Equally troubling -- and equally dangerous -- is the fact that the Million Man March has undoubtedly reinforced the notion that race oppression is more important than gender oppression in the daily lives of Black people in North America. The political and organizational mobilization for the demonstration obviously generated intense pain, anger and debate amongst African-Americans about the current state of gender relations. Yet that debate -- so necessary for our healing and liberation -- has been shunted aside as a distraction too divisive to consider, and much too painful to engage. So now, as Blacks beam with unabashed pride amid the incessant dim of detractions by certain whites (and certain negroes who feel obliged), we can easily ignore the male privilege that allows us to forget that the March would probably not have happened had it not been for the many Black women who worked to bring it off. And it is just as likely that many of us will minimize the intense feelings of rejection being expressed by women all around us -- maybe even beside us -- who know what they need to say but who also know that there are too many of us who do not want to hear them. For now, their hurt and their need for validation of their voices and their lives will be silenced, again, as will the screams and whimpers of those women and children being abused by men intoxicated by unexpected whiffs of their own validation.

It will also escape many of us that homophobia and class have been little affected by the Million Man March. Like sexism, these forms of oppression have been de-emphasized as too trivial to merit our anxieties about the future, and the present, of the Nation within the nation. Yet the suffering (and death) caused by these multiple-and-interacting oppressions threaten the new shoots of hope and resolve, just as deeply-rooted weeds always threaten to choke the life from new plants.

There is something wrong with this piece, something too one-sided, too preachy. Perhaps if I talk with Sulaiman we can straighten out the kinks . . . I feel a bit unbrotherly calling him so early this Sunday morning, but he is gracious as usual, and I am relieved. He wants to hear what I have written, and as I read to him I am choking with emotion, my eyes brimming with tears. Something is right here, yet something is still wrong . . . As soon as Sulaiman begins to speak I know: I am leaving out what is most positive about the Million Man March, the tide of concern, the waves of deep desire for change, the willingness to become different, better, new. This is what is happening between Sulaiman and me at this moment: two Black males reaching out to one another, less afraid than before, less constrained by fears of what will be thought (even by ourselves) about our touching each other's heart, engaging each other's

mind. This is a mere portion of the remarkable outpouring of an entire people's feeling that justice must come soon and that we must take the risks to bring it forth. I multiply all we share by one million. That is why I called Sulaiman a "friend of mind." I sit with all my brother has given, all we are sharing, and I realize that we men must keep wrestling with the demons of privilege -- including that "good guy" demon that makes me want to preach to other men, believing that just because I have decided to change I am already changed. There is so much more work to do, on myself, on the institutions I inhabit

Which brings me back to my nephew Winnie. Perhaps I should simply tell him that the Million Man March is a message, much like the message my sister or brother-in-law send when they call Winnie to dinner. The message tells us that it is time to come in, time to clean up, time to be real with family, time to make home. In short, the message is that it is time to stop playing . . . time to end all forms of privilege.

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