Black Shame and HIV

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When I was diagnosed with HIV the one thing I wanted to do was to tell my ma. Growing up your ma is your rock and the one you call especially when something goes wrong. Instead of telling her my news I did the very opposite, I kept it from her as best as I could. In a weird way I would have had an easier time with telling her I was gay if I didn't have a shame about being HIV. My shame was feeling like I disappointed her. That the son she thought would give her grandchildren would instead bring her embarrassment from family and friends and be the walking abomination they preach in church each week. Thinking I finally had the courage to tell her I would be stopped by the dialogue running in my head. "That's what you get for being gay" "This happens to people like you". Others may be fortunate but whether it's the family or some other relationship, it seems for many gay black men there exists an unspoken shame that may be one of the factors that contributes to the rise of HIV.

Unlike the shame other races feel in the LGBT community, black gay men face additional judgment that comes from cultural and societal establishments that already views us as lesser than. With the addition of HIV one can develop a feeling that says because of your disease, you're now lesser than what you were before. Many believe that the DL or closeted lifestyle contributes to the rise in HIV rates but the argument can be stated that the struggle lies in the realization that, despite coming out as gay black men, many still faces other barriers that extend beyond their sexuality. For a black man to just identify as gay is difficult and a privilege not rewarded to us, unlike the white LGBT community. When a black man walks out the door the first thing that people see is skin color and react to that color whether good or bad. Race is an important topic that is also never fully discussed along with the ugly truth of racism, but the reality is that it's effect can be a contributor to one's acceptance and coming out. For me it was hard for me to initially identify as gay as I was still trying to figure out what it meant to be black. This is the same for a black man's HIV status as now he has the other societal constructs which can make ones dealing with the disease difficult, but not impossible. Add a layering of shame in how they identify and this further hinders the healing process.

Yet there's recognition that many gay black men don't see their sexuality or race as a negative but as a shining example of what perfection looks like. Whether on their own or with the support of others they have learned to embrace their identity. Sadly there's just as many who don't have the same pride or instilled value system. This shame echoes within the community and affects young and old and remains unresolved as to admit or recognize shame is a flaw many don't want to

acknowledge. There's a struggle in how to align their identity of being black, of being a man, being gay and having HIV. Shame hinders the process of finding one's self and in the process coming to a place of embracing and acceptance.

The biggest assignment of this shame comes from our own black community, both straight and gay. We receive messages early on that being gay is not acceptable. These messages are even transmitted in a not so subtle way, whether it's the elderly person who sucks in her teeth and shakes their head, the black women who roll their eyes at the sight of you or the passing brotha who gives you a look that communicates their disgust, voicing loudly, "It's a shame." This repertoire is so constant that one tries to develop a thicker skin that sometimes cannot stem the bias from penetrating. Even in the moments when gay black men camouflage themselves in straight circles they can be witness to the black women's disappointment on the lack of good black men and voicing disappointment that all the good black men are either in jail or gay. The shame from black woman draws from their frustration of other straight black men who have abandoned their family responsibility, the disappearing fathers or the ones who have made empty promises as they're taken away by the police.

In a gay black man search for acceptance and by turning to the gay community there's reminders that the LGBT community is not prone to show the ugly face of racism as awareness that invisible color lines exists and some can gain entry only by the straightness of their hair. This may make it easier for Asian and Latinos as they also don't come with reminders of America's past. Yet seeking refuge in the gay black community sometimes doesn't offer complete protection as within the community itself are other hurting gay black men who walk with unresolved shame. The popular phrase, 'Hurt People, Hurt People' resonates as gay black men may inflict the pain they're feeling on fellow members. As a result gay black men can sometimes be greeted with 'shade' as the very presence of another gay black male brings to life one's own self-hate. The acts of unacceptable the straight community inflicted, are now recycled to be used against each other, from the shaking of the head, the cutting stares and rolling of eyes. This adopted shaming reaction happens unprovoked as the very prescience of another gay black man is seen not as a unifier but as a threat.

HIV further hinders relationship with other gay black men as the virus creates a caste system in that unfavorably viewed HIV negative gay black men can now measure their increased worth over someone who's black and HIV positive. Sadly within this caste system exists a new level of judgment as one with HIV can use his undetectable status as a tool of worth over one who's HIV status is not. Stigma of HIV covers all who are positive and leaves markings of low self-worth and our shame is further nailed in as some start to believe the unworthy title and place them in risky sex driven environments, despite the risk of re- infection.

Addressing this shame can be one of the ways to finally make progress when it comes to HIV and gay black men. It's something that needs to be discussed in a brutal and honest fashion. Too many gay black men are walking around with shame underneath the service and not finding a place of healing from others and mostly themselves. In thinking about this unresolved issue that lays in the gay black community a line from Malcolm X is referenced.

“The greatest mistake of the movement has been trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to wake the people up first, then you’ll get action.”
? Malcolm X,

When it comes to black shame among gay black men we have to wake up as this issue is holding us back. By addressing this we can join the others who have found self-acceptance of their race and health status. We can be among our community and know when someone gives us ’shade’ that we don’t return it but recognize that it’s someone who’s hurting. And in that moment ask how I can help my fellow brother. As gay black men especially with HIV we must find a way to stop walking with our heads down and eyeing the limited ground but instead confronting that shame so that our heads are held high as we eye the unlimited possibilities of the sky.

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