

SECTION FOUR

INQUIRING INTO MY PRACTICE AS A FATHER



[\(CD-S4Clip 1.mov\)](#)

In this section I seek to show how I have inquired into my practice as a father whilst seeking to live according to values that I believe to embody Ubuntu in ways that are generative of new possibilities..

I am using the video clip above to evidence my Ubuntu way of being with my son and to convey my meaning of that dynamic interrelationship. I am a father because he is my son. I am a son because of my parents. I am a grandfather because of my son. I exist with him in the world. I think that the video above shows something of the quality of interconnectedness, interdependence *and* independence that characterises our relationship. I am being both challenging of him and connected. He is displaying an ease and confidence with me and with his ways of thinking. He is neither overawed nor disrespectful. I see him as an adult speaking with another adult. I also see his difference from me and that he has his own personality. I think I see myself in this clip living my values of being affirming of his adulthood while still seeking to challenge him to stretch himself.

I continue by exploring some ways in which I have sought to influence the creation of a set of possibilities for my son that were greater and different from the ones that are, stereotypically, imposed upon and or chosen by Black young people. I wanted us to

redefine success and devise strategies for achieving it. I show how I have stepped outside of the 'cultural' patterns of Black male behaviour to co-evolve ways of being that move beyond colonising restrictions. This is not a 'victory narrative' in the sense that I am showing how successful I am. It is a narrative that through its description shows how I have come to know and why that knowledge is valuable.

I was partly motivated by factors to do with the discourse that advances the notion of non-present or poor (read bad) Black male role models generally and in the family in particular. I wanted to model another way of being; I wanted to give my son a different experience, one in which he had a father that actively participated in his life and personal, educational and political development. I have struggled to learn the hidden rules of success in this society and I wanted to make an easier path to those rules for my son than the one that I had had. There are also factors to do with me wanting to live in a way that more closely matched, tested and evolved the values that I hold.

In the Black community there are issues to do with trauma and its impact upon relationships. There are issues to do with masculinity and the forms it takes in the times that we live in. Endless exhortations for men to move away from their macho behaviour and misogynistic values are doomed to failure if they do not recognise the factors that generate and sustain these values and self destructive behaviours. What I have learned through my inquiring activity is that many Black men are hurt, vulnerable and in need of acceptance and love. Much of the behaviour that is negative and personally and socially destructive is the result of the sense of exclusion, degradation, and worthlessness. That it is expressed in its opposite form should not be allowed to mask the point that I am seeking to make; that many of the (so called) negative behaviours are the result of the trauma that African peoples have experienced and that a path to healing that trauma is through inclusional, intersubjective, explicitly transformational, relational activity. That is through first acknowledging and then working *with* others to create different realities. This involves evolving a 'reidentification' that embraces a commitment to values of humanity that enable, sustain, heal and protect.

The work I have done with the Sankofa Learning Centre was informed by that desire. I wanted to be working with others to create a healing nurturing, inspiring, learning space in which my son and others would feel valued, safe and free from the pressures to adopt an unhealthy sense of what it means to be a Black male or female in this world.

My son's name is Ifétayo. It is a Yoruba name. It means "Love brings joy". I wanted to be engaged with him in ways that would help him transcend the traumatised dominant culture that negatively affects so many people of African origin. I wanted him to experience so much love that he would have great joy in his life. I may not have succeeded in this. What I have succeeded in doing is live my values as I sought to be an inquiring, reflexive, decolonising influence on my son's life learning. In so doing I have been an influence on my own learning. Our relationship has fundamentally expanded my understanding of what it means to be human. Watching him grow up before he encountered the racism and negativity from a variety of sources that impacted heavily upon him, I learned what it is to view the world with wide open eyes and see endless possibility. I learned something about who I may have been before I was subjected to a destabilising conditioning. I learned what it is to love and be at peace in the world. I learned through the quality of my engagement with him as I sought to protect him, inform him, guide him and support him. We were both influencing each other and I was consciously open to being influenced by the experiences I

encountered with my son. I did not think that I had all of the answers, as I understood that many of these answers came from a paradigm that I wanted to distance myself from. I set out to learn through practice. I got so much wrong along the way. I want to share my accounts of some of the experiences of me seeking to live according to my values and my learning being influenced by the experiences that I engaged in. These accounts are the data of my inquiry and that data is the evidence I use to show how I have sought to be a decolonising, educative influence on my learning and the ways in which that learning may be of wider value.

I have kept logs of our engagement and reflected upon my embodied reactions as I review the logs. I have tested out specific behaviours and noted the consequences I experienced from them. I have taken photographs to capture visual memories of a significant moment. I have identified recurring themes and patterns and made decisions based upon them that have informed my behaviour.

There are a number of ways in which Black males and females have been differently affected by slavery. Booker outlines one of these.

While both males and females shared a determination to break free of their captors by whatever means they could avail themselves of, prior socialization in Africa would make it probable that the Black male felt the psychological humiliation of military defeat more acutely. Already, on the slave ship, the White male captors had taken the military capacity of the African males into account as they tended to shackle them below decks while leaving females unshackled above deck....
(Booker, 2000, p 2)

Black males suffered particular forms of degradation focussed precisely around their maleness. As we move into a post slavery era there are still pressures to force Black boys to conform in order to survive the range of forces ranged against them. I am not exempt from these.

Let me give two examples.

My son goes to a school. The teacher calls me in. "Your son is a problem". He tells me. "Tell me what the problem is please," I ask. "What has he done"?"
"Well, its not what he has done so much as his attitude"?"
"Is he rude"?"
"No, not really. In fact he's liked by a lot of the boys and the teachers, but that's part of the problem. He's an influence on them."
"A bad influence"?"
"Well. He could be"
"Please, help me to understand. What exactly is it that my son does that is an influence on other boys that concerns you"?"
"Well he's usually the last one into class"
"Is he late"
"No. Not really. It's just that he does not appear to be keen. He just strolls around".
"But he's not late"?"
"No, but his attitude is rubbing off on other boys. It's the casual way he walks and he never looks concerned".

So my Black son was in trouble because he looked as if he did not care. What was being said is that he was not conforming to an expected mode of behaviour.

On another instance I speak with his teacher about an incident that had occurred in which a boy had taken the property of another boy. A teacher had said to my son that he knew it was him that took it. But could not prove it. Eventually the boy who had taken the property was identified. It was not my son. At parents day I raised my concerns with the head of the lower school about what this might have done to my son's sense of belonging. He did not seem to understand what I was getting at. I asked him why the teacher had accused Ife. He said that he had done so as part of his strategy for flushing out the culprit. I asked him just how this would work. He becomes angry and defensive and told me that it was a junior member of staff who had done it.

“I accept that but you must understand why I am concerned.”

The teacher raised himself up from his chair and leaned towards me. He was a big man who teaches and plays rugby. He says angrily “I am not going to sit here and be made to account for the actions of a junior member of staff by you!”

I am surprised and seek to diffuse the situation. This man does not want a Black man to ask him questions about his job even though he is paying a considerable amount each year in fees.

In the first case my son is probably being seen through the eyes of stereotypes in which Black men are criminals. In the second case something about his physicality, the way that he walks is seen as subversive.

I sit down with my son afterwards and talk to him about what the teacher had to say about him. He denies that he is *always* the last one into class but accepts that this is often the case. Part of his reason for doing so is linked to him not wanting to stand out! I hear myself telling him that he needs to adjust his behaviour if he is to survive in the school. He does not see what he has done wrong. I hear myself saying that the way he walks is a problem for that teacher and so why doesn't he try to appear as if he is walking with more energy and purpose. As soon as the words pass my lips, before I even take into account the look on his face I check myself. “

“Actually son, be who you are. Why should you change the way that you walk? Just make sure that you do all of the work that is expected of you”.

In the collaborative inquiry that I engaged with some other Black teachers we identified the problems that many of the White teachers had with the boys' physicality.

“...they say that they are big, when they're actually smaller than a White boy with them. They talk about a sense of threat when they come close to them, yet when White children do that they call it playful or affectionate. The boys are seen as a threat and treated as such and get punished far more harshly than White boys.

I interviewed a HMI and he confirmed that this was often the case in his experience. “Many of the teachers seem to be afraid of them”. He said. He told me of watching a head

teacher shout and scream at a Black boy who had been brought to see him for some misdemeanour, whilst his White co-culprit stood next to the Black boy and just got a telling off.

“He was vicious to the Black boy, but he did not see it. He did not think that he was doing anything wrong. I was an inspector there to inspect his school and he was on his best behaviour as far as he was concerned. He did not see that he was doing anything wrong.” (Interview with inspector who does not want this quote attributed)

Slavery historically and experiences such as these and the desire of parents for their children to succeed has engendered approaches to parenting that are often experienced as harsh and distancing. Many Caribbean Africans speak of “giving the boy a good beating”. Or, “if he can’t hear. He must feel”. In fact there are a number of ways in which Black males can have their spirits ‘broken’ just as effectively by their parents as by slave master. The thinking being that by us doing this we will protect you from experiencing even greater damage at the hands of others who do not care for you.

As a result of incidents like this I have become clearer that living values of Ubuntu in the ways in which *I-we* parent is decolonising in that it helps maintain and or heal relationships between us. I have become clearer and firmer in knowing that I want my behaviour to be based on love and aspiration for the individual to grow to be who they need to be more than on a desire for them to meet criteria of success laid down by the dominant colonising society.

Historically Black men have needed to be physically tough to survive. They have needed to be able to withstand loss as nothing they had they could confidently keep, either the slave master, police or other institutions and social cultural forces could remove from them. However to continue with those aspects of that strategy that distance ourselves from our children and from each other more generally is counter productive. We need to have ways of relating to each other that are characterised by love, affirmation and collaboration. As a man I wanted to be different. I wanted to be this different man with my son by, amongst other things:

- Being present
- Explicitly showing love
- Protecting him
- Providing him with a nice home and assisting him to see other possibilities for what he could be and achieve
- Treating him as a partner in his development

Being present

My son’s mother and I separated when he was only about five years old. It was a traumatic break up for all of us and I have reminded myself of that when I have got frustrated with him. I will never forget the way that he used to look at me when I came to see him. There was what I experienced as a big “why?” in his eyes. “Why was I not there more?” “What had happened to a part of his life?”

I have, always regarded my break-up as out of the norm. I did not see that I was just doing what Black men do. To me I was in a difficult relationship that I was struggling to survive.

I left because I felt that I would lose something really important to me if I stayed. The pain that my leaving caused though has left scars on all three of us involved. Break-ups in the Black community are just as painful as anywhere else. We have feelings and emotions and many never get over them. Life traumatises and experiences like break-ups must have a stronger impact upon people who have already suffered hurts than on others who have had relatively positive life experience. We experience 'hurts' and our colonial trauma compounded by the continuing playing out of cycles of internalised colonised values. I do believe that many Black children's emotional development and educational attainment is affected by their family circumstance. I do not think though, at least in my case, that it was a cavalier decision.

I recognised that my son was not getting the level of support that he needed at home and made myself available to him. I deliberately never lived with another woman and did my best to make sure that he knew that I loved and valued him and that my home was as much his as mine. He had his own bedroom and facilities to help him relax and study. I saw him as often as I could and on a couple of occasions he came to live with me for months at a time

I took him to school most mornings and when he joined the rugby team at his school and for his club I spent every winter Sunday morning at a touchline watching him play and cheering him on. I wanted to be there for my son.

He used to stay with me every other weekend and we used to get a takeaway meal and watch movies. We connected the stereo system to the speakers and used to play action movies with the sound turned up loud. It was great fun. Up till he was about 11 he'd watch the movies while he lay on top of me on the sofa. I loved it. I loved being his father.

Every night before he went to bed I would tell him stories. I would make them up and make sure that they were both fun and relevant to his life and his aspirations. I stopped telling him stories when he got about 11 or 12. I wish I hadn't. I was just so tired at night that I did not have the strength. I do regret that though because he used to ask. I realised that what he wanted was my company and was distressed at not getting more of it. I told him as often as I could, how great I thought he was and how much I loved him and we had fantastic holidays together in Australia and in Kenya.

As a result of some of the racism he experienced in school he eventually left the prestigious private school he was going to at the age of 12.

Ambiguous messages

I wanted him to see that he could lead a happy life and have the good things if he worked hard. The paradox is, that as time has gone by and I have put more and more money into supporting family and the my son and the Sankofa learning centre I have had less and less time to have fun! This is so true that my son has on more than one occasion said to me that I need to spend more money on myself and enjoy my money more.

I have wanted to model other approaches to punitive 'slave' approaches to discipline that I connect with both survival and a kind of self-hatred or abuse. In my practice at the Sankofa

Learning Centre I have seen shifts in the types of relationships that I have been able to develop as a result of my doing so.

I have seen too many deaths and distorted and destroyed lives among the young Black people around me to comfortably kick him out and let the streets be his teacher "If him cyaan hear him mos feel". A member of my family when he was in his 18th year saw three of his friends killed in his presence. One of them had his throat slit while he stood next to him. He watched him die unable to assist him for fear of receiving the same treatment. Can I kick my son out into that world? Does keeping him at home protect him from it? Whose responsibility is it for his protection?

I do contradict my values in terms of how I speak with/to him. I keep going to or mentioning the negatives, which I know just shuts off his participation in discussion, but I fail to resist the temptation too often.

I wanted him to be happy and to grow up free of some of the negative self-beliefs that I had internalised but maybe I could have chosen other ways of doing so.

Being a different type of Black man

African American men and women both are affected by racism, but in gender-specific ways. (Hill Collins, 2004, p5)

In essence, a problematic Black gender ideology coupled with an unattainable hegemonic (White) gender ideology leaves heterosexual Black men and women struggling to develop honest, affirming love relationships. (Hill Collins, 2004, p 259)

The need for us to discover ways of openly loving and relating to each other as we engage in decolonising our minds and our social, economic and political circumstances is recognised by many. Louis Farrakhan is one of those who embraces this. At his speech to the famous million man march of 16 October 1995 in Washington, DC. Minister Farrakhan said that the purpose of the Million Man March was to show the world the determination of African American men to no longer "be looked at as the criminals, the clowns, the buffoons, the dregs of society,"

The attendance at the rally demonstrates a widespread recognition for us to think again about how we behave towards each other and an understanding that we cannot just shift our behaviours towards each other without also shifting our political and economic situation commensurately. It is also significant that at a rally of men who are characterised by stereotypes of machismo and mutual negative behaviour that much of the language was about love.

But what does love mean on a daily basis? How do I as a father express love to my son in meaningful ways? It is obviously about more than telling him that I love him. Love must mean doing what is best in a situation even if the benefactor of your love does not agree with what you are saying or doing. At the same time it has proven to mean in my life allowing things to happen that go against my beliefs and being prepared to learn from them. In Appendix 1 Section Three I tell the story of my son bringing a dog home and

how, despite my initial violent resistance I came to learn things about the world that disconfirmed what had been significant beliefs that I held. It helped moved me towards an understanding of the way that all life has some things in common.

I use this as an example of my expression of love of my son and to show how, by being there and being engaged with my son's world, my own education and understanding of the world was expanded. The more time I spent with the dog the more I questioned my belief that animals and humans were just fundamentally different. I saw so much similarity that it frightened me.

In appendix one section three, I share an extract from my inquiry log that shows how I found out things about his world, as I drove him a Sunday morning rugby match. Here is a brief extract from it:

Maybe my feeling better about Ife his morning started when I asked him if he gets embarrassed by me being at the touchline when he's playing rugby. "Not really", he said "I feel 'Dad is watching so I got to do well'". I'd never had a sense that my presence pressured him and he certainly rarely looks pressurised on the pitch (or anywhere else in his life for that matter). "I like to be there" I said. "If anybody was to hurt you deliberately or unfairly I'd kill them". I realised as I said it that I should not have. I would not actually kill somebody. "I know you would Dad" Ife said, "that feels good. I feel safe". Well, what can I say? My son knows that his old dad would kill for him and likes the feeling?!!

I did point out to him that I was not speaking literally in the case of a rugby match and I think he understood that. I was still pleased that he understood that I loved him and that that gave him a sense of safety in the world. In the extract below I am making connections between our car drives and the conversations that I had had with other Black men during the boy's camp. I am trying to show the existence of a relationship between my son and I and an appreciation of my care for him that I wanted him to have in his life.

Below is a picture of Ife that sums up so much of his approach to life.



I love this picture. I took it when he was about 16. Looking at it has an educative influence on me because I see in it my son as a happy person doing what he loves. It is reflective / indicative of one of the contradictions that I am working with. I believe that childhood should be as carefree as possible at the same time as I believe that children need to be prepared for the 'real world'. I believe, for example, that GCSE's are still very useful "passports" in this society. Yet, even as I write these words I am aware of how much my desire for him to 'succeed' subverts the sheer beauty I feel here. I want to celebrate this boy who can spend all day next to the pond watching his fish, feeding them by hand, stroking them, understanding them, really being at peace with himself and the world.

The process of helping him to see that he has to work hard to get the exam qualifications that he will need to achieve his dreams was a hard one. He had the conceptual understanding and the highest ambitions for himself. He just wanted to enjoy himself as much as possible along the way. Yet, as I look at this picture I am filled with pride that I am able to provide him with a home, with a fish pond and a garden in London big enough to keep chickens. I am filled with a longing that at first I find hard to understand. It is as if, as I watch, I am reminded of my dreams for myself. I remember days when I did nothing else but paint my pictures. I could spend hours painting an eye or admiring a particular shade of green or even looking at the sky in wonder. I could feel so deeply. There is something about allowing myself to connect with that part of me that is not mediated too strictly by my cognitive processes that opens up a connection with him, an understanding that tells me that here is a child in the world desperate to experience himself in his own terms. I feel the connection he has with animals and I wonder if he has that with people. I experience admiration of him and sadness.

We spent some time together that summer by the pond while he taught me how to feed the fish by hand. One day we spent the whole day there. We ate and drank and spoke while we sat and lay by the pond. It was a beautiful day. In describing that day I am describing how I learned by just being there and sharing in my son's world. It made me feel as if something inside me had been expanded.

Conclusions

In this section I have shown that I have worked with a spirit of receptivity that has enabled me to learn things I could not without that quality of inclusionality reflected in the nature of intense educational engagement with my son and my role as a father. One of the things that I have managed to do is to accept new ways of being and seeing the world and shifted my embodied sense of self.

Seeking to contradict notions of the ‘absent’ Black father and be as present as I could has enabled me to develop and ‘hold’ ways of being that have extended my humanity.

There is something that I have learned about just being present that questions the notion of “quality time”. The idea that what matters is not how long you spend with somebody but the quality of your being when you are there. That is both something I accept and there is a real need to be around so that when the other is able or ready to talk you are available. I have found that my son does not talk to me on the basis of my schedule.

I have been present for my son in times of joy and crisis. One summer he won two or three races at the school swimming competition. I won the fathers race. We both felt great. I took him to a Pizza Hut in Streatham and we both ate as much as we liked in celebration. I drank beer and he drank endless amounts of ‘free’ fizzy drinks. We could hardly walk by the time we left, but we were so happy.

I have worked with other Black men on what we can learn about being fathers by critiquing our practice together. The biggest lesson has been the notion of just being there and allowing them to transgress our values and expectations without harsh retaliation. Our children may not recognise it but they need us and we have to be big enough to, when other things do not work, put up with things we do not like so that we maintain relationships that can assist us remain influences on their learning.

I am proud of the extent to which my son does not buy into some of the White standards of beauty and of his connection with Africa.

What I have managed to do is to be there as an active loving presence in his life. I have maintained a relationship with him that is more than a transactional one. As two males we do clash but we also love each other. We touch and we talk. I have struggled to demonstrate other approaches to being a Black man than the stereotypes and I have managed to retain a communicated sense of faith in his ability. A possible measure of success is that this year (2006) he has been accepted into university to do the kind of course that he actually wants to do – Animal Science! He got there after I asked myself to focus on him and what he wants for himself and how I could help him meet *his* dreams and not the dreams that were driven by a wider society, by his peers or by my own ideological positions and ambitions. I immediately thought of animals and searched for a course on the Internet. When we visited the college together, I saw the excitement in his eyes that I have not seen outside of him playing with his PlayStation! He thanked me profusely for helping him get in. I think I was able to be this influence because I made a more complete break away from the influences of other stricter (restricting) (colonial) notions of parenting that characterise too much of the Black community.

Accepting and moving on

I came across the William Wordsworth poem, Michael. It moved me deeply. It tells the story of a father and mother who have a son who is their dream come true. They give him everything. In order to meet a financial commitment they send him off to work to earn money, with the expectation that he will return. He finds the new world full of distractions and never comes back home again. He gets himself in trouble and eventually moves abroad to try to rebuild his life. His parents never see him again. Their hearts are broken. The poem got me to reflect upon the extent to which I am trying to order Ifetayo's life for him and the extent to which he will do what he wants to do and that he will leave me and may lose contact with me. I have invested huge amounts of emotional energy into him, but that was because of the person that I was trying to be. He is not an investment that will bring returns. I need to focus more on achieving my other life goals, preparing for my retirement and letting go of him and helping him let go of me

In the meantime we continue to enjoy a loving relationship that I consider a triumph.