



COULDN'T SEE FOR LOOKING

THE FACT that my son Omari was writing at all, let alone poetry, came as a surprise. He had to be force-fed his handwriting assignments in grade school. His poor penmanship, in my mind, was a reflection of the carelessness that he exhibited with his academic work. As time went on, I found myself having to constantly remind him of the importance of doing well academically and that his school work must come before recreation.

I had always emphasized to my children the importance of learning well at least three “alphabets.” I told Omari and my daughter, Marijata, that if they could master A through Z, o through 9, and a third alphabet, then they would not only do well at school, but also at whatever else they wished to do in life. The third alphabet could be sharps and flats, the primary colors, dance steps, or any other set of artistic symbols. Ours is a society reliant upon symbols, and I believed that if they mastered the two key alphabets, along with an artistic one, then racism and sexism would have a hard time holding them back. Whether Marijata understood and applied this formula consciously, or whether she was simply self-motivated,

she excelled consistently in all areas. But with Omari, I had to continually hammer home the basic lessons because of what seemed to me to be his desire to avoid working at the highest level of his academic potential. On paper, he misspelled words that I knew he could spell correctly; he'd get the right answers to his arithmetic problems, but only do part of what was required in the assignment. At one point during his elementary years, I almost gave up entirely on his acquisition of a third alphabet, because it was so difficult to get him to master the two basic ones.

When Omari was in first grade, my wife Jerri and I moved to a suburban town where she was the director of a child care center; she loved her job, and the twenty mile commute from the city, coupled with the difficulty of finding quality child care, had become a hassle. We wanted our children to have the opportunity to interact with other children of color while living in this predominantly white, upper class community, so we enrolled them in the public school system rather than the local private academy. We certainly did not want them to have an additional opportunity to develop elitist attitudes.

Throughout first and second grade, ongoing battles took place between Omari and his teachers and parents. We adults were convinced of his academic potential, but Omari seemed determined to extend the playground to the classroom. Periodically, Jerri or I (or both of us) visited with his teachers and heard about his taunting and teasing of his peers, with some incidents culminating in fistfights. The largest second grade incident included the allegation that, at recess time, Omari caught a spider in a plastic bag, later released it in his classroom, and caused a near stampede of children running out of the room when he announced, "Look, a black widow spider."

In third grade, Omari had a black teacher who took a no-nonsense approach with him and insisted that he excel. That year he did extremely well and subsequently finished grade school without dropping below a B average. This still wasn't good enough for my black male child. My father had been rejected by West Point, supposedly because he had failed the admission exam by one point; Jerri's father was denied admission to

the University of Alabama Law School, allegedly for academic reasons, although he later was admitted to Yale Law. Accordingly, I viewed Omari's B average as a baseline for improvement in junior high school; anything less than an A had the potential for being a racially motivated act against him. I had to stay on him, ride him, guide him.

Junior and early senior high school English writing classes continued to be traumatic experiences for Omari and his teachers. For the first quarter in ninth grade, Omari received all B grades and one A. Trying to be supportive of Omari, but also to remind him that more was expected of him, and as an alert to his teachers, I wrote on the back of his report card, "We are pleased with Omari's first quarter's performance. Omari has set a goal of improving in everything. We have agreed with his goal. Please let us know, as time passes, if he is improving, and how we can help him improve. Halfway through the second quarter, if he is not improving, please call me for a conference. Thanks."

My written message was extremely important to me because of the low academic expectations that many teachers have for African American males. Additionally, these children all too often have low expectations for themselves, having received no encouragement from any other arena. Educators had documented the significant lag that occurred by third grade for black children as compared to whites. In many public schools, the predominantly white teachers' expectations were so low that a B grade was deemed wonderful for an African American male; I called it the "B for a black boy" syndrome. I was not going to have either Omari or his teachers believing that B was a satisfactorily high level of academic achievement for my son. I knew that Omari could well face racial discrimination in college and later, in the work world, even if he was fully qualified academically. I worried endlessly about what would happen to him if his grades were less than outstanding. His seemingly conscious lack of effort appeared to be heading him in all of the wrong directions.

During the ninth grade, Omari was showing great promise in several track events, but I was determined to not let him go down what I considered to be a socially preordained athletic road. Maybe he and his teachers

thought that his first quarter report card with all Bs and one A was something wonderful, but I had to let them know that “good” wasn’t “good enough” for Omari. I read to him my written comments to make sure that he knew he needed to convert some of those Bs into As, particularly in English and math. Jerri, too, gave reinforcement with one of her “bed-time talks.”

When Omari had been in elementary school, Jerri and I had watched in dismay as, throughout Pittsburgh, many of the African American boys were tracked into peewee running backs, fifty-meter sprinters, little league catchers, and young jump shooters. We watched later as, one by one, many of these same kids experienced difficulties in specific academic areas, failed grades, and got placed on the athletic “fast track.” Observing this pattern, and having noted the same thing with many of our own friends when we attended public schools years ago, Jerri and I made academic success a prerequisite for Omari to engage in athletic competition. It seemed that he had really understood our messages when one of Omari’s coaches tried to convince him that athletics should play a greater role in his life, and that he should run cross-country in the fall instead of playing in the marching band, which, at that time, had become his third alphabet. I was very pleased when Omari refused the suggestion.

At the end of the second quarter in ninth grade, however, he dropped to a C+ in science, and a C in English. I wrote in red ink to his teachers: “I am very concerned because I asked that you please call me half way through the second quarter if Omari was not improving. He went down in three areas, and you never called. I wish to have a conference as soon as possible!” Jerri and I went to the school and raised hell with both the teachers and the principal. We left only after I threatened to bring my concerns to a school board meeting, and after having obtained assurances of their strict attention to Omari’s performance from his teachers. Several weeks later, one of them responded with a formal “academic deficiency report”: “Dear Mr. Daniel: Omari is too interested in entertaining the class to pay attention to me. What would you have me do now?” Despite what I sensitively took to be a racial jab at me for having raised a “natu-

ral born entertainer,” I wrote back: “Thank you for your concern, and its immediate expression to me. You don’t have to do anything. His mother and I will handle the matter. I can assure you that his entertaining days are over.”

I decided that Omari’s conduct required drastic action on my part. Too many young black males were going down too many blind paths; even with proper guidance, my son seemed to be veering toward academic detours that led to nowhere. I was not going to have my son travel any of those routes even if, as my father had always said to me, I had to “half kill” him. Because he was in ninth grade and no longer a child receiving spankings, I was prepared to give Omari an old fashioned, get down lesson with my belt—until Jerri called a technical foul on me by inquiring gently, “Jack, what about what your first-grade teacher did to you?”

Jerri didn’t want me to hit Omari, and didn’t believe in beating children under any circumstances, but I couldn’t believe she stooped so low to get her way. She had gotten my first-grade report card out of my high school yearbook and was now waving it in my face. I had always considered this teacher to be a racist who had set me up and then didn’t have the heart to go through with her dirty deeds. When I was in first grade, teachers only recorded an S for “satisfactory progress”, and an X for “pupil needs to show greater progress in order to reach the standard required.” After the first twelve-week period, my teacher gave me an X in everything. After the second twelve-week period, she gave me an X in everything. The fact that I managed to earn an S in everything for the final period and pass to second grade was proof to me that she had been biased for two-thirds of the academic year. Jerri’s analogy had to be false; Omari’s teacher was trying to help him, and Omari wouldn’t listen to his teacher, Jerri, or me. I knew that my teacher had had it in for me.

After explaining all of this to Jerri, she said in a disturbing voice, “Jack, did it ever occur to you that she passed you because you were black, and she didn’t want you in her class for a second year? If she did, then neither your brains nor your father’s beatings did you as much good as you seem to believe.”

I considered this, but I didn't answer her as I proceeded upstairs to get my belt. When I came back down, Jerri barked in staccato, "Don't-hit-Omari-with-that-belt!" Seeing the fire in my eyes, she backed down a bit, asking, "Why don't you try to talk to him? Have you ever thought of listening to his explanation?" Past reason now, I screamed, "Jerri, I have tried talking, and look at the good it produced! Omari needs to be torn up the way Daddy beat me!"

As I hit him the first time, my fury was transformed into the sickening feeling of beating myself. When I hit him the second time, my arm movement was slowed by my suddenly rising fear, clearly related to my first-grade report card. My mind raced through the negative effects failing would have had on me. I thought about the possibility that, while repeating first grade, I would have been the class clown just like big, ugly Jonathan who had failed first grade and repeated it in my class. My mind flashed over to the teacher's comments on Omari's deficiency report. The anxiety intensified as my fears for Omari intermingled with my fears for my child-self. I realized that I wouldn't have gone on to second grade with my two closest friends, George and Herbie. Our "Three Rocket Boys" space-traveling group would have been split; they might have replaced me with someone like Charles, one of the fastest runners in our grade. My girlfriend Nadine probably would have dropped me for some second-grade big shot. It was bad enough when she started to like that jive-time T. J., the midget-league quarterback.

I thought about the fact that several of Omari's African American friends had failed a grade. I wondered what it was like for him to make friends with the white students in our primarily white suburban neighborhood. Had Omari's own "Rocket Boys"-type relationships been split up? Was his conduct a way of rebelling and identifying with his friends of color? It was horrible to think that for Omari, passing might have social consequences as dire as failing the first grade would have had for me.

I think I hit Omari for only a third or fourth time, and stopped as I got caught up in these thoughts. As I reflected on Jerri's words, I could

not imagine that being whipped about my X marks in first grade had produced a positive influence on me. My mind and emotions boiled with guilt for having whipped Omari, anger for the whippings I did receive for school-related reasons, and anger at the teacher—this time for probably passing me when I did not deserve to pass, and the fact that she might have saved my life.

Regardless of the emotional maelstrom it had produced in me, Omari's whipping seemed to have helped some because, during the final quarter, he earned several A grades and only one grade less than a B, and that grade was a C+, still in English. Now, though, I was unable to feel satisfied completely with his progress because I had come to focus on the idea that his teacher, too, might have done what was necessary to get rid of her "entertainer of the year."



My fear and battle for Omari's survival continued. When he was in senior high school, Omari nearly threw a tantrum when I asked him to write an essay for the local Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream" contest. I had hardly finished what seemed to me to be a reasonable request before he began with, "Daddy, every year you ask me to do the same old thing. I've written about him and his dream every year. I know, I know. He had this dream. He believed that everybody should love everybody, and judge people by the content of their character, and . . ." Since he was talking back to me, doing what my mother called "sassin" me with his "man-nish self," I interrupted with, "Omari, be quiet and write the essay!" The way he was talking, rolling his eyes, and gesturing wildly reminded me of just why the "old school" told children, "If you don't listen, you are going to feel; a hard head makes a soft behind." He pushed at me again.

"What do you want me to write that I haven't already written?"

"Do what I told you to do before I hurt you! Just write it!"

With that, he left the family room in a huff. As he sat down at the dining-room table, he mumbled something just loud enough for me to

hear about “this stupid writing.” Since he had at least gotten started, I didn’t say anything else to him. In his usual “just do enough to satisfy the basic request from Daddy” mode, Omari handed me an essay in about twenty minutes. I refused to read it; as I handed it back, I told him to do a careful review of it and then produce it on the computer.

A few weeks later, as I came in from work one day, Omari rushed up to me excitedly.

“Daddy, Daddy, guess what? I won!”

“You won? What?”

“I won the Martin Luther King essay contest! I’m getting a plaque and one hundred dollars for first prize from the Black Child Development Institute!”

I could not believe this young Negro. Omari hadn’t won a thing. If I hadn’t made him write that essay, this “win” never would have occurred. He failed to remember the fuss he had made; he had all but blasphemed King’s name. As I viewed it, I was the one who had won by making him write the essay, and to make my point, I told Omari he had to give me half of the money. He protested, screaming that the money was his.

“Your money? Who made you write the essay?” He retorted sassily, “Well, who is going on television to read their essay?”

“I don’t care who is going on which television station to read which essay. I just want my half of the money.”

This scene reminded me of a story my father-in-law liked to tell about a man winning at the track, so I decided to try to illustrate my point by telling it to Omari.

“Listen. A man went to the racetrack with his entire paycheck. He lost five races in a row, and was down to the last twenty-five dollars of his pay. He knew his wife was going to kill him since this would be the second month in a row that they couldn’t pay their bills. So, the man prayed for God to send him a sign. When the man lifted his head and looked out on the track, he saw one gray horse whose color he took to be a sign from God. The problem was that the horse was going off at ninety-nine

to one odds. Since he had prayed for a sign from God, the man decided to show his faith in God by putting his last twenty-five dollars on this ninety-nine to one shot.

When the horses came out of the gate, the gray horse was dead last, and so the man prayed earnestly for God to help the horse. 'Lord, this is old Leroy calling on you. I know that the gray horse isn't much, but I know that all power is in your hands. Lord, would you please use a little of your spare power on that horse for me today?' When the horses went around the first turn, the gray horse was still last, and the man started praying heartily about how he was going to attend church every Sunday, quit drinking, quit smoking, and get to work on time every day. Then the man added, 'And Lord, if you let this horse win, I will never return to the racetrack. Please Lord, let him win. Let him win, Lord.' Suddenly, the gray horse started to gain ground. As the gray horse gained on the others, the man started yelling, 'Go ahead, Lord! Go ahead, Lord! Do your thing, Lord! You the man, Lord!' When the horses turned the last corner and headed toward the finish line, the gray horse was in front by five lengths. Suddenly the man cried, 'Okay Lord, okay Lord, I can take it from here myself!' And off he went to the window to collect his winnings."

He laughed throughout the telling, and when I ended, his devilish grin made me believe that Omari had gotten the point of the story. He was going to collect "his" money, read "his" essay on TV, because "he" had won; he was going to take it from here himself. I just couldn't permit Omari to think that he had really won. I could not let him forget how I'd had to make him write the essay, or his ill-behaved efforts not to do so. More importantly, I didn't want him to think that he had now achieved the essential level of writing excellence that he needed as a black male in American society. I thought of my mother's adage, "When success goes to a man's head, it leaves him looking in the wrong direction." I decided to turn Omari's head back in the right direction.

"OK, I'll tell you what. Since you now write so well, this weekend I want you to write an essay on Malcolm X."

“Aw, Daddy! Why?”

I answered him with something my father always said to me.

“Because it will do you some good.”

True to his developing form, Omari asked, “Did the Lord make the gambler bet again to do him some good?”

“Go write,” I responded quickly so that Omari wouldn’t think that he had gotten the best of me. I was shocked by his question and its implied answer; only after he had left the room wearing a smile did my own face relax into one, too. I had to admire the quickness of his wit.



Throughout the rest of high school, Omari took care of business, earning mostly A grades, doing especially well in science courses and in the marching band. He continued to have problems with writing, however. He tried to dodge a twelfth-grade required essay on *Macbeth* by instead producing a video he called “MacRapper.” While I had to admit that the video was impressive, and that I was proud of his creativity and his teacher’s praise, I also made him write the essay. Although the content was pretty good, it contained spelling errors; he protested when I told him to run it through the computer’s spell check and print another copy. He just did not seem to “get” my fears about what could happen to him as an African American male, irrespective of his achievements. He thought I was nagging him, being “the professor.” Why couldn’t he see what I was trying to do for him?

The struggle continued into college as he fussed and fumed about his “unfair” composition instructors. He was taking a wide range of subjects, a number of which were in literature. At least once a semester Jerri and I asked him about his plans for an academic major but he consistently responded, “Stop bothering me. I don’t know yet.” Shock cannot begin to describe my reaction when in the fall of his junior year, Omari declared a creative writing major. When I asked him why, he casually replied, “I had to choose something to graduate; most of my courses were

in creative writing.” I immediately assumed that he had simply taken an easy way out regarding his choice of major. I wondered if I would ever succeed in getting him to think seriously about the long-term impact of his educational decisions. Then I said to myself something I often heard my mother say in exasperation regarding me, “I’ll just have to give him up into the hands of God!”

I found out more about his creative writing from one of his professors, who had supervised him as he wrote a collection of poems entitled “We Fish.” I was dumbfounded as she told me about the “fascinating poems” Omari had written, but I thought she was simply being nice because I had helped recruit her as a faculty member. Also, since I suspected the presence of the often-articulated view that African American women tend to “raise our girls and spoil our boys,” I thought that she was being a little soft with Omari. Perhaps most of all, though, I just didn’t believe Omari was serious about his choice of poetry as his area of emphasis.

I had always found it difficult to appreciate poetry and the poetic form—to know when a poem was a poem and when a poem was just someone’s strangely arranged words in structures known and understood only by them. Sometimes I even wondered whether poems were written by people like Omari who I thought were too lazy to write complete sentences, although I must admit to having tried to write poems myself but never doing better than the most elementary rhymes. What further aroused my suspicion was my awareness of how much Omari had gotten into rap music, which he claimed contained deep messages beyond what I perceived to be the usual misogynistic, sexually explicit, violent lyrics littered with “niggers,” “motherfucking” this, and “motherfucking” that.

However, when I read another collection of his poems, I was moved to understand that Omari had used writing as an effective way of handling life’s traumas.

Greek Picnic

Philly

My people jamming
with my people
A rainbow of chocolate
looming through the streets
Instinctively being pushed along
by a soulful bass-filled rhythm

My people were around me
My people were with me
then without missing a beat
They were shooting
My people were shooting
at my people
they ran to, from, and around me,
and I too ran
ran and hid from my people

There my sister lay
more dark African blood
spilling into American soil

This time the cause wasn't

Those people
It was my people
I did not stop to help
my sister because
my people were still shooting
at my people
and I was alone

Dealing with That Time

That time when you had me in your basement
 where empty pop cans decorated the walls.
 That time when I was too young to know better
 but old enough to remember:
 That was the time you took down my pants,
 saying that you had a game for me.
 You put your warm lips on my penis.
 You said you were making it grow.
 I remember you looking up into my face,
 your eyes did not lie, so I didn't panic,
 didn't fight, didn't enjoy, or at least I don't
 think that I did. I just stood silent.

I had it all planned for the next time I saw you.
 I began lifting weights, you were seven years
 older than me, I needed strength. I practiced
 for you. I punched my pillow, I punched the sofa,
 I punched the walls, I was going to punch you.
 You were going to fall. You would not fight back,
 just lie there and know why you were bleeding.

I have seen you several times since then,
 and I haven't punched you.
 The image of you lying there
 mouth bleeding is so sweet to me. I could
 not swing. I was arthritic around you,
 joints would freeze, muscles rebel, mind unwind.

When your brother got asthma, I went out and laid
 in a field of freshly cut grass and watched the day pass.
 When your father died, I went fishing with my father,
 and we seemed to have caught more smallmouth bass
 that day than ever before. I made sure to kiss him, that night
 you wept for your father, and tell mine how much I loved him.

When your stepmother got laid off, I went to work with my mother and played Duck Duck Goose with the children at the center. I read to them, chuckled as I envisioned the lady my mother fired as your stepmother. When you were accused of molesting another child, I binged on a four-course meal. I had golden brown turkey, prime rib, corn bread, scalloped potatoes, shrimp, black-eyed peas, and for dessert triple-layer chocolate cake and deep-dish apple pie. When you were acquitted, I purged myself. I puked up all that I had enjoyed. I tried to throw up all my memories. I thought of your eyes that never betrayed you and wanted to vomit in them. I wanted to get it out, get you out, but I couldn't. Now I am waiting to see you, I hope I don't freeze, I hope I can end my silent rage.

When I finished reading “Dealing with That Time,” my rational faculties gave way to one of the most nauseating feelings I have ever experienced. It stirred in my stomach, anxious to rush up my throat so that I, too, could vomit. I knew the poem’s content had to be true because I recognized the actual “basement where empty pop cans decorated the walls,” and my mind flashed back to that year when Omari requested weights as a Christmas gift. My hurt feelings obtained no relief from recalling that the perpetrator had been raised in a single-parent home and sexually abused by his stepmother. And the hurt I felt was for more than Omari; it was for the perpetrator, the perpetrator’s family, and for the deep dismay I knew Jerri and Marijata would experience upon reading Omari’s lines of verse, and for not having known about the incident for so many years. I became silent in an effort to absorb the pain.

As difficult as it was to learn for the first time of these disturbing experiences, my silence was not simply a function of my dismay. The poem had convinced me that, to the extent that one can do so, Omari had managed this darker-side-of-life episode. So much of an African American male’s life could be determined by the way he dealt with violence in its many manifestations. Becoming neither a victim nor perpetrator of vio-

lence was a key to African American male survival, and my mind seized again on the fact that Omari had used writing as an effective coping mechanism.

“Dealing with That Time” moved me in the ways that I had always thought written expression should move people. I always believed that it had to do something for you, had to move you in some fundamental fashion. The writing had to conjure up deep emotions, and make the emotions come alive deep within oneself; it had to present vivid accounts of personal, but shared, human experiences. Because this poem affected me in the way I thought a good piece of writing should, it stood as affirmation of Omari’s talent as a writer. Still, I had to ask if this was merely wishful thinking; maybe my emotion came only from the truth behind the words, not the words themselves and Omari’s skill in expressing them. I chose to ask him about the truth of the episode, which he confirmed. Psychologically, I felt as though I, too, had frozen before ending my silent rage. I felt the need to keep the content of “Dealing with That Time” to myself, although I was anxious for an evaluation of my son’s work by some of my professional writer friends.



I started thinking about how I could have missed the poetic within Omari, and about how I might have missed his ability to resolve complex problems, including those about which I had so many lurking fears. What had he been thinking during my lectures? When he remained silent, as I had directed, what was he really thinking about my pushing him, beating him, and goading him? I had nearly tunnel vision when it came to my focus on teaching him to cope with societal problems, but I never thought about how he was coping with me, his father. Feeling quite uncomfortable about what I might have missed about Omari, I was reminded of the time as a child I couldn’t see what my friends Mabel and Bee Bee claimed to be a “man on the moon.” Moving on this memory, I wrote three or four pages of rambling prose from which Omari distilled the essence of the experience.

couldn't see for lookin

In grade school,
I kept hearing
know-it-alls
like Mabel
and Bee Bee
talk about seeing
some man on the moon
and one night
as I stood with them
staring up at the sky
I couldn't see
and still didn't believe,
but as they pointed and giggled
my eyes drifted
up Mabel's shadow
and I could see
that her legs
looked like two of the world's
most beautiful
dark brown baseball bats
with ankles
just thin enough
for a firm grip,
and legs that got nice and thick
just below her knees
and I could see
that Mabel's butt
looked like two of those curved
salt cured
Virginia hams
that Uncle William brought by
on Sundays.
Later, when we walked,
I watched as

Mabel's hams
 pushed each side of her skirt
 up and down,
 allowing me to see
 inch by inch
 of her deep chocolate thighs
 until finally
 I thought I saw
 what my buddy Otis called

that "wonderful stuff,"
 and it was,
 and I felt wonderful
 until I looked up at the moon,
 and saw him
 looking down on me
 seeing what I saw
 seeing what I felt
 and seeing that now
 I was too ashamed
 to look back
 at that wonderful stuff.

The clearer the face became over the next two nights, the more I couldn't understand how I had missed it before. I felt so ridiculous that I never did let Mabel and Bee Bee know what I had finally seen. Similarly, I wasn't sure I could let Omari know what I had seen in him. What if it had been there all along, and I had missed it just as I had missed the man on the moon? I wondered what would I have learned if, instead of summarily silencing him and directing him, I had listened to whatever was going to follow, "But Daddy, I . . . ?" I just could not admit to the possibility that all of my efforts at chiseling him into a black man could have been more effective if I had worked, in less intrusive ways, with what was always

there. I couldn't get past the fact that when it came to something I deemed necessary for his survival, my approach was uncompromising.

I mused about other ways I "couldn't see for lookin" and may have missed seeing below the surface of my own son. Maybe, I needed to look again, much more carefully, at the person I thought I had seen so clearly. Maybe, I needed to listen more carefully to Jerri when she said, "Jack, leave Omari alone. Don't try to rush him into manhood. He is going to be okay."