



FATHER'S DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, June 15, 2008

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I. Historical Background and Documents

The unique importance of fatherhood is manifested in myriad ways throughout African American and American history and culture. The biblical text for this cultural moment, “Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,” is indeed a fitting epigraph for African American and American Father’s Day celebrations.

The origins of Father’s Day can be traced to simple church services sponsored by two daughters whose fathers had died. The first was celebrated on the East Coast. In the summer of 1908, the sleepy town of Fairmont, West Virginia, and the Nation, were still trying to come to grips with the worst coal mining disaster in American history, which occurred in nearby Monogah one year earlier. On December 6, 1907, 361 men were killed in this blast, approximately 250 were fathers. As the birthday of her deceased father drew near, Grace Golden Clayton had the epiphany to honor these nameless fathers

and her father, with a father's day worship service. As a result of Mrs. Clayton's efforts, America's first Father's Day worship service was celebrated in Fairmont's Central United Methodist Church, in 1908.¹

The second was celebrated, two years later, in the West Coast city of Spokane, Washington. During a Mother's Day service in 1910, Mrs. Sonora Smart Dodd "realized that it had been her father, William Smart, a Civil War veteran, who had sacrificed-raising herself and five sons alone, following the early death of his wife in childbirth."² Father's Day sermons were delivered for the first time in Spokane on June 19, 1910.

For the next sixty plus years, Americans petitioned Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Calvin Coolidge, and numerous sessions of Congress, to pass a law making Father's Day a national holiday. On April 24, 1972 Congress passed Public Law 92-278 which did just that. This historical document reads:

"Joint Resolution

"To authorize the President to designate the third day in June of each year as Father's Day.

"Resolved by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the third Sunday in June of each year is hereby designated as 'Father's Day'. The President is authorized and requested to issue a proclamation calling on the appropriate Government officials to display the flag of the United States in all Government buildings on such day, inviting the governments of the States and communities and the people of the United States to observe such day with appropriate ceremonies, and urging our people to offer public and private expressions of such day to the abiding love and gratitude which they bear for their fathers.

Approved April 24, 1972"³

II. A Project for Fathers

In 1996, Phillip Jackson founded "The Black Star Project." The primary mission of this organization is to improve "the quality of life in Black and Latino communities of Chicago, and nationwide by eliminating the racial academic achievement gap."⁴ In 2007 and 2008, the Black Star Project sponsored "The Million Father March" projects around the country. The mission of these marches, according to its website was: "This Year Black Men Will Again Lead the Nation Back to School. We want 500,000 men in 200 cities to take their children to school this first fall school day of 2007." An Oklahoma City participant urged the African American religious community to get involved:

"We are sending out information about the event to local churches, to the media, to other chambers and our elected officials to get out the word about the Million Father March. We are asking ministers and elected officials to let their constituents know so that we can get as many people as possible. We are asking

churches to include this information in their sermons to encourage all males in the community to help reinforce a strong, fatherly presence in the life of children. We want to send the message that mama doesn't do it all – daddy can help, too.”⁵

III. Remembrances of Fathers and Father Figures

A. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas' memory of Myers Anderson, the grandfather whom he and his brother were reared, remembers this significant man in life through the theme of education.

“For him all honest work was good work, and he proudly wore a T-shirt and khaki work pants (or, during cooler weather, a khaki shirt or sweatshirt) every day, but he expected us to do better. Our first task was to get a good education so that we could hold down a ‘coat-and-tie job,’ and he wouldn't listen to any excuses for failure. ‘Old Man Can't is dead – I helped bury him,’ he said time and time again. It wasn't easy for us to accept his unbending rules, but we did it anyway; he gave us no choice. The door to his house, he said, swung both ways. It had swung inward on our arrival, but if we didn't behave, he warned ominously, it would swing outward. He added that he would never tell us to do as he said, but to do as he did – and he kept his word.”⁶

B. Indianapolis Colts Coach Tony Dungy recalled the life lesson that Wilbur Dungy, his father, taught him about the “unfairness” of growing up black in white America:

My dad was always fascinated by how and why things worked, but at the end of the day, he was most concerned with character. He believed that most of life was an object, and he always found ways to pass those lessons on to his kids.

“One day I was complaining to him about the unfairness of life. I forgot the situation, but I know he agreed that I had been wronged. His response has stayed with me for many years, even though it took me a while to completely figure it out.

“‘When I was in the service,’ he said, ‘they didn't want to teach us how to fly planes, so we taught ourselves to fly.’” *We Blacks; African Americans.*⁷

C. Lastly, Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Leonard Pitts recently spoke frankly regarding the importance of the role of the African American father in holding the family together. The occasion was a Father's Day interview on NPR by Farai Chideya regarding his thoughts on the subject and his latest book, *Becoming dad: black men and the journey to fatherhood*. “I think the challenge that we face as African-American men,” Pitts said, “is to reclaim our place in our families and in our communities. The challenge that we face is to understand that our value to our communities and our homes goes beyond the monetary, which is where everybody always stops, you know. But that we as men bring something special to a household that cannot, by and large, be duplicated women.”⁸

IV. Traditional and Modern Father's Day Songs

Although Mother's Day is a much more celebrated holiday, there are great songs that extol the virtues of fatherhood. One is a century old hymn (Faith of our Fathers). The second (Patches) is a popular song from the blind blues singer Clarence Carter. This song, unlike the lyrics of the Temptation's rhythm and blues classic, "Papa Was a Rolling Stone," portrays a positive, heroic image of a poor African American sharecropper father, and the loving relationship that he shared with his son. The third is quickly becoming a contemporary classic (Dance with My Father Again) by the late Luther Vandross. The final song is a feel-good Father's Day song by the Winstons, (Color Him Father).

Faith of Our Fathers

Faith of our fathers, living still,
In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword;
Oh, how our hearts beat high with joy
Whenever we hear that glorious Word!

Refrain:

Faith of our fathers, holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death.

Faith of our fathers, we will strive
To win all nations unto thee;
And through the truth that comes from God,
We all shall then be truly free.

Faith of our fathers, we will love
Both friend and foe in all our strife;
And preach thee, too, as love knows how
By kindly words and virtuous life.⁹

Patches

I was born and raised down in Alabama
on a farm way back up in the woods.
Oh I was so ragged folks called me 'Patches.'
Papa used to tease me about it,
but deep down inside dad was hurtin'
'cause he done the best he could.'

My papa was a great old man
I can see him with a shovel in his hand
Education that he never had
But he did wonders when the times got bad
The little money from the crops we raised
Barely paid the bills we made

Oh life whipped him
Down to the ground
When he tried to get up
Life would kick him back down

On the day papa called me
To his dyin' bed
Placed his hand on my shoulders
And in tears he said

Patches
I'm depending on you, son
To pull the family through
My son, it's all left up to you

Two days later papa passed away
And I became a man that day.

Refrain
Patches
I'm depending on you, son
To pull the family through
My son, it's all left up to you.¹⁰

Dance With My Father Again

Back when I was a child, before life removed all the innocence
My father would lift me high and dance with my mother and me
and then Spin me around 'til I fell asleep
Then up the stairs he would carry me
And I knew for sure I was loved

If I could get another chance, another walk, another dance with him
I'd play a song that would never, ever end
How I'd love, love, love
To dance with my father again
When I and my mother would disagree
To get my way, I would run from her to him
He'd make me laugh just to comfort me
Then finally make me do just what my mama said
Later that night when I was asleep
He left a dollar under my sheet

Never dreamed that he would be gone from me
If I could steal one final glance, one final step, one final dance with him
I'd play a song that would never, ever end
'Cause I'd love, love, love

To dance with my father again

Sometimes I'd listen outside her door
And I'd hear how my mother cried for him
I pray for her even more than me
I pray for her even more than me

I know I'm praying for much too much
But could you send back the only man she loved
I know you don't do it usually
But dear Lord she's dying
To dance with my father again
Every night I fall asleep and this is all I ever dream.¹¹

Color Him Father

There's a man at my house he's so big and strong
He goes to work each day, stays all day long
He comes home each night looking tired and beat
He sits down at the dinner table and has a bite to eat

Never a frown always a smile
When he says to me how's my child
I've been studying hard all day in school
Tryin' to understand the golden rule

Think I'll color this man father
I think I'll color him love
Said I'm gonna color him father
I think I'll color the man love, yes I will

He says education is the thing if you wanna compete
Because without it son, life ain't very sweet
I love this man I don't know why
Except I'll need his strength till the day that I die

My mother loves him and I can tell
By the way she looks at him when he holds my little sister Nell
I heard her say just the other day
That if it hadn't been for him, she wouldn't have found her way

I got to color this man father
I think I'll color him love
Said I'm gonna color him father
I think I'll color him love

My real old man he got killed in the war

And she knows she and seven kids couldn't of got very far
She said she thought that she could never love again
And then there he stood with that big wide grin
He married my mother and he took us in
And now we belong to the man with that big wide grin

Think I'll color this man father
I think I'll color him love
Said I'm gonna' color him father
I think I'll color the man love, yes I will.¹²

V. A Concluding Poem

I conclude this offering with a poem by an unknown author about a type of father we know so well and miss so much.

By the Light of My Father

How I miss my father
I wish he had not been
so tired
when I was
born.

Writing deposit slips and checks
I think of this.
He taught me how.
This is the form,
he must have said:
the way it is done.

I learned to see
bits of paper
as a way
to escape
the life he knew
and even in high school
had a savings
account.

He taught me
that telling the truth
did not always mean
a beating;
though many of my truths
must have grieved him
before the end.

How I miss my father!
He cooked like a person
dancing
in a yoga meditation
and craved the voluptuous
sharing
of good food.

Now I look and cook just like him:
my brain light;
tossing this and that
into the pot;
seasoning none of my life
the same way twice; happy to feed
whoever strays my way.

He would have grown to admire
the woman I've become;
cooking, writing, chopping wood,
staring into the fire.¹³

VI. Books for Father's Day

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2. Hrabowski, Freeman A., Kenneth I. Maton, and Geoffrey L. Greif. Beating the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Males. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998.
3. Davis, Sampson, George Jenkins, and Rameck Hunt. The Bond: Three Young Men Learn to Forgive and Reconnect with Their Fathers. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2007.
4. Richardson, Jonathan. The Complicated Life of the African-American Man (What's on His Mind). Now It's Done Pub. 2006

Notes

1. Smith, Vicki. "First Father's Day Service." Martinsburg Journal June 15, 2003. Online location: West Virginia Division of Culture and History www.wvculture.org/HiStory/miscellaneous/fathersday02.html accessed 23 January 2008.
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3. "Father's Day." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. Online location: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Father%27s_Day&oldid=204529686 accessed 23 April 2008.
4. "The Black Star Project." The Black Star Project. Online location: www.blackstarproject.org accessed 23 January 2008.
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7. Dungy, Tony, and Nathan Whitaker. Quiet Strength: A Memoir. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2007.
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11. Vandross, Luther, Foxy Brown, Beyonce' Knowles, Busta Rhymes, and Queen Latifah. Dance with My Father. New York, NY: J Records, 2003.
12. Winstons (Musical Group). Color Him Father. New York, NY: Sensational Music, 2002.
13. "By the Light of My Father." Author Unknown.