

"Pressure of Perfection"

by Brian James

Being black, male and a business professional seems at times like an anvil, a burden, a struggle with the pressure of perfection. Is this self-inflicted or society imposed is the question I find myself asking in my times of reflection. I don't know is the conclusion I often arrive at. Probably a mixture of both, my rational mind jumps in to restore balance and order to thought. The pressure of perfection, real or perceived is a weight I carry. Raised in a society with its culture soaked with the salt water sweat of the Caribbean Sea, the black green and gold blood of a proud people and hurricane season tears of its colonial heritage while struggling to really be independent my identity was molded. Britain left its indelible mark on us thought we didn't realize it. "Carry yourself a certain way," "speak a certain way, the Queens English like you learned in school daily," "act properly" like an eloquent English gentleman I imagined.

The sense of striving to achieve a standard that somehow seemed unattainable; so fragile, shattered with the next inevitable blunder. Mocked by those who embraced the chopped up, mangled mix of English based creole and west African influences passed down form decades of the

triangle trade route which saw our ancestors shipped to the Americas like cargo.

Migrating to America seemed at the time, now over 20 years ago such a liberating concept. America, Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. The "Free" part seemed particularly intriguing. At least they really broke free from their colonizers. I landed in Baltimore alone at 2 am in the morning of September 3, 1998. My first greyhound ride took me south to Richmond VA and the urban campus of where I would grow to call home. The feeling was euphoric. I basked in my rebirth. I excelled in all aspects of study and the sport that would pay my way, buoyed by the motivation and memories of the family and friends left behind. I was so immersed that I didn't stop to consider the fact that my first experience with the police would initiate me to the norms of the male African American experience. Within less than a month on campus I was pulled upon by a cruiser while the officers yelled at me, alighting to accost me, leaned me up against the car, searched me and checked my head. I heard one officer say "the man we are looking for has a particular style of haircut." This all happened in front of my dorm, at dusk, on campus. Thinking about it now yields cascading feelings of rage and embarrassment, none of which were present at the time in the 18-year-old who was just happy to be here.

The years that ensued matured my mind to notice an almost parallel reality where some people are looked down on and treated as inferior. If you spoke too "urban", with too much "slang," too "ghetto", lived in a certain neighborhood or were deemed poor, uneducated or under-educated there exists a different set of rules for you. If some individuals express themselves in a way that's not deemed by a select stratum of society as "proper" enough you could end up on the outside looking in. This parallel reality left little to no room for remorse and restoration for lapses in judgment due to youthful exploration and experimentation in a quest to find identity, self-expression of confidence and independent thought or a strong opinion of self. In this reality some of us are prone to random acts of violence. Unfortunately, this matrix was all too familiar to me.

I retreated to the familiar voices of safety harbor, "carry myself a certain way," "speak a certain way," "act properly" plus now you're educated so you will be accepted. "You shouldn't express yourself too much" the voice constantly echoed. "Don't upset the norm" is the constantly refrain. "You know the black man in America has no margin for error." For year I carried these voices in my head while wrestling to suffocate the voice of my faith which would at times broke to the surface to remind

me I am a child of God, made in His image. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I didn't live those truths constantly out of fear of criticism for being the confident child of God who has novel ideas and thoughts; the quiet and strong leader who leads by example and listens more than he speaks but let his voice be heard when needed. Like the lion of the Serengeti who roars when necessary. Now I on an upward trajectory of empowerment, understanding vulnerability and confidently standing on the shoulders of men who look like me, who talk like me, with the swagger like me. Men like Marcus Garvey, Muhammad Ali, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Thurgood Marshall, Arthur Ashe, Collen Powell, Michael Jordan, Barak Obama and the list goes on. The author Lauren King sums it up nicely "There are two kinds of perfect: The one you can never achieve, and the other, by just being yourself."