

# TOWARD A RENAISSANCE FOR THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY: CONFRONTING THE LIE OF BLACK INFERIORITY

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## I. THE HARDEST QUESTION

How do we extinguish—once and for all—the lie of black inferiority that continues to undermine the ability of black people to love themselves and to love each other? That, in my view, is the hardest question regarding law, religion, and the African-American family that will have to be faced over the next twenty-five years.

Like all families in the United States today, black families are facing profound challenges. Marriage rates are low. Divorce rates and the rates of births to unmarried women are high. These and other disturbing trends are especially pronounced in the black community.<sup>1</sup> African-American families, in addition, carry the weight of unique challenges that are grounded in the past, but still reverberate today.

The black family has been under siege for centuries. Black people in the United States endured more than two hundred years of family-crushing enslavement and another hundred years of humiliation under Jim Crow. Even with the dramatic changes brought about by the movement for civil rights, continuing racial and economic discrimination (and, until recently, family-dividing welfare policies) have put black and white families on vastly unequal footings.

In spite of these difficulties, an amazing number of black people have managed to succeed. But the constant assaults have worn many families down.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Megan M. Sweeney & Julie A. Phillips, *Understanding Racial Differences in Marital Disruption: Recent Trends and Explanations*, J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 639, 643 fig.1 (2004) (documenting that the divorce rate among white women was 29% lower than that of black women in 1993); Joy Jones, *Marriage Is for White People*, WASH. POST, Mar. 26, 2006, at B1 (stating that the marriage rate for blacks fell by 34% between 1970 and 2001).

The results show up plainly in the data. In 2006, nearly 80% of births to black women were out of wedlock.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 35% of black children live with two parents, compared with 84% of Asian children, 76% of white children, and 66% of Hispanic children.<sup>3</sup> Black children, who make up about 15% of all children under the age of eighteen in the United States, account for 32% of the children in foster care.<sup>4</sup> Black males are far more likely than other males to be incarcerated.<sup>5</sup> Although differences among women are smaller than they are among men, black females are more likely than other females to be incarcerated.<sup>6</sup> Too many black families are in crisis. Too many black children are facing bleak prospects.

Against this backdrop, it may come as something of a surprise that, in addressing the subject of the African-American family, I will not focus my attention on the importance of promoting healthy marriages in the black community. Nor will I focus on the need to strengthen relationships between African-American fathers and their children, or the importance of strengthening couples' communication skills, or mothers' and fathers' parenting skills. Nor will I address the need for increased economic opportunities and other supports for black people, especially black men. For the record, I believe that we need *all* of these initiatives—and more—to strengthen the African-American family. But we also need something much deeper. I want to focus on what I believe to be the most important thing that we must do to pave the way for a rebirth for African-American families: to extinguish the lie of black inferiority.

Slavery and Jim Crow are gone. The civil rights movement has opened many doors of opportunity. But the lie of black inferiority, the most devastating and longest-lasting consequence of the enslavement and colonization of African people, remains with us. The lie of black inferiority says that black people are not as beautiful, not as lovable, not as intelligent, not as capable, not as worthy as white people, or any other people, for that matter. The lie was first told centuries ago to justify the dehumanization and subjugation of African people. For about three hundred fifty years, it has

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Herbert, *A Dubious Milestone*, N.Y. TIMES, June 21, 2008, at A19.

<sup>3</sup> Child Trends Data Bank, Family Structure (June 19, 2007), [http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/59\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/59_PDF.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Child Trends Data Bank, Foster Care (Jan. 22, 2007), [http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/12\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/12_PDF.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Child Trends Data Bank, Young Adults in Jail or Prison (June 23, 2006), [http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/89\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/89_PDF.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

shaped other people's views of black people, and it has shaped our views of ourselves. The lie has hit at the very heart of the black family throughout the course of American history by undercutting our abilities to form healthy self-images and to create the healthy, nurturing relationships, marriages, and families that we and our children so desperately need.

The point is simple: if you love yourself, you are more likely to be able to love other people. If you have a healthy regard for yourself, you are more likely to believe that you are entitled to good things and you will be better able to build healthy, nurturing relationships. People who believe, at some level, that they are not as beautiful, not as lovable, not as intelligent, not as worthy, will find it hard to love themselves and the other people who look like them. They will find it hard to build nurturing relationships and families.

I am referring to what educator Robert Franklin calls "the love deficit."<sup>7</sup> Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint and journalist Amy Alexander call it "self-loathing."<sup>8</sup> Sociologist Joy DeGruy Leary describes it as "vacant esteem."<sup>9</sup> Whatever we call it, I believe that a sense of not being fully worthy is at the core of what is ailing too many black people and families. There is, as theologian Cornel West has described it, a "nihilism" in black America, "a disease of the soul" in which too many of us are "coping with a life of . . . lovelessness" that can only be "tamed by love and care."<sup>10</sup> A growing body of evidence suggests that the lie of black inferiority negatively affects black people's sense of self-worth and efficacy, undermines relationships between black men and women and between parents and children, limits black children's possibilities, and contributes to destructive behaviors in the black community.

Let me be clear. This is not about "blaming the victim." This is not about the past. It is very much about the present. It is about a destructive lie that still lingers; a lie that must be extinguished to make way for a healthier and stronger future for the African-American family. Black people are not responsible for the lie, but we must assume primary responsibility for its

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<sup>7</sup> ROBERT M. FRANKLIN, *CRISIS IN THE VILLAGE: RESTORING HOPE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES* 102 (2007).

<sup>8</sup> ALVIN F. POUSSAINT & AMY ALEXANDER, *LAY MY BURDEN DOWN: UNRAVELING SUICIDE AND THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICANS* 14 (2000).

<sup>9</sup> JOY DEGRUY LEARY, *POST TRAUMATIC SLAVE SYNDROME: AMERICA'S LEGACY OF ENDURING INJURY AND HEALING* 127-33 (2005).

<sup>10</sup> CORNEL WEST, *RACE MATTERS* 14, 18-19 (1993).

eradication—so that we and our descendants can, at last, be free. Free to fully love ourselves and free to fully love each other.

## II. HISTORY AND EMOTIONS

In February 2008, psychologists at Stanford, Penn State, and UC Berkeley released a paper entitled *Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences*.<sup>11</sup> The paper reported on the results of a six-year study that concluded that many Americans subconsciously associate black people with apes.<sup>12</sup> The researchers found that their subjects (primarily white male undergraduates) could identify blurry ape drawings much faster after they were primed with pictures of black faces than with pictures of white faces.<sup>13</sup> The researchers consistently discovered a black-ape association.<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Eberhardt, a Stanford psychologist who supervised the research, says, that “Despite widespread opposition to racism, bias remains with us. African Americans are still dehumanized.”<sup>15</sup> The study suggests that there is “one old race battle that [black people are] still fighting . . . . That is the battle for blacks to be recognized as fully human.”<sup>16</sup>

Much of black history is the story of the amazing strengths of a people who were able to, as many black grandparents used to say, “make a way out of no way.” From the depths of enslavement and official segregation, in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, African Americans embarked on an extraordinary journey toward freedom—establishing families, building communities, all while making priceless contributions to America and to the world.

But there is another side to the story. Alvin Poussaint and Amy Alexander, in a book called *Lay My Burden Down: Unraveling Suicide and the Mental Health Crisis Among African-Americans*, remind us that these Olympian accomplishments have been accompanied, in many instances, by deep pain.<sup>17</sup> They point to alarming increases in self-destructive behaviors among black

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<sup>11</sup> Phillip A. Goff et al., *Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences*, 94 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 292 (2008).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 292.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 294–97.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Discrimination Against Blacks Linked to Dehumanization, Study Finds*, SCI. DAILY, July 9, 2008, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/02/080207163811.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> POUSSAINT & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 8.

people, and conclude that they are an outgrowth of a “culture of oppression” that has “taken a tremendous toll on the minds and bodies of black people.”<sup>18</sup> They argue that the growing rates of suicide, homicide, depression, and stress-related illnesses among black people can “be viewed as evidence of a peculiar kind of communal self-hatred, an especially virulent form of anger, self-loathing, and lost hope that leads to a devaluation of the lives of fellow blacks; and . . . to a devaluation of the self.”<sup>19</sup>

African Americans have been engaged in a battle to be recognized as fully human since their arrival in the United States in the early 1600s.<sup>20</sup> They did not look like white people and their customs were strange.<sup>21</sup> Those differences gave rise to prejudices against them.<sup>22</sup> But it was not until the latter part of the seventeenth century that the lie of black inferiority began to take hold. It was then that the colonies changed from “societies with slaves” to “genuine slaveholding societies”—communities in which enslaved Africans went from being peripheral to the nation’s economic system to central to it.<sup>23</sup> Slave labor increasingly became a substitute for indentured labor, and blackness began to be “equate[d] with bondage” and “servitude with darkness.”<sup>24</sup> Black people increasingly became defined as “permanent, degraded outsiders,”<sup>25</sup> and attitudes and beliefs about black inferiority gained currency to protect an increasingly lucrative economic system.

Religion and law played leading roles. Religion gave the lie life and law gave it force. Historian Douglas Ambrose has ably described the theological gymnastics of the clergy in eighteenth-century Virginia, for example, as they sought to prove that slavery was not only permitted, but required by God’s law.<sup>26</sup> The clergy in Virginia contributed to a pro-slavery consensus in the South by working to persuade brothers of the cloth who were against slavery

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<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 14.

<sup>20</sup> MARK S. WEINER, *BLACK TRIALS: CITIZENSHIP FROM THE BEGINNINGS OF SLAVERY TO THE END OF CASTE* 28 (2004).

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 30–31.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 30.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> Douglas Ambrose, *Of Stations and Relations: Proslavery Christianity in Early National Virginia, in RELIGION AND THE ANTEBELLUM DEBATE OVER SLAVERY* 35–57 (John R. McKivigan & Mitchell Snay eds., 1998).

that it was fine to be against slavery personally, but wrong to advocate in favor of abolition.<sup>27</sup>

Yale historian Jon Butler has illustrated how theologians developed a complicated theology of obedience to explain and support the power of white masters over enslaved black people.<sup>28</sup> Judge Leon Higginbotham, in his book *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process*, shows that the idea of the inferiority of black people began to be stamped into law as early as the seventeenth century, and blossomed by the eighteenth century with the enactment of comprehensive slave codes, first in Virginia and then in other states, which institutionalized the “precept of black inferiority and white superiority.”<sup>29</sup> The belief in black inferiority was shared by the framers of the Constitution. Although some of the framers were somewhat more liberal than others in their attitudes toward slavery, they still held slaves and, to one degree or another, believed in the inferiority of black people.

Historian David Brion Davis has written about how fears of abolitionism caused the idea of black inferiority to gain greater currency in the United States.<sup>30</sup> The more abolitionists agitated, the more slaveholders insisted that black people deserved to be enslaved, and the more they set about characterizing and treating black people as inferiors.<sup>31</sup> There was, of course, an inherent contradiction between Christian ideals and slavery, and between the existence of slavery and the constitutional ideals of equality and liberty. The lie of black inferiority helped Americans resolve those contradictions.<sup>32</sup> So, over time, the lie took hold. It worked hand-in-glove and reinforced a system of enslavement that gave slave owners permission to treat black people as less than human.

Black men and black women did not belong to themselves. They lived their lives under the control of their owners. With the force of the good book and the law behind them, slaveholders controlled relationships between black men and black women without regard to their feelings, determined the course

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<sup>27</sup> *Id.*; see also A. LEON HIGGINBOTHAM, JR., *SHADES OF FREEDOM: RACIAL POLITICS AND PRESUMPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN LEGAL PROCESS* 45–49 (1996) (discussing how the clergy in Virginia developed and preached the gospel of black inferiority).

<sup>28</sup> JON BUTLER, *AWASH IN A SEA OF FAITH: CHRISTIANIZING THE AMERICAN PEOPLE* 129–63 (1990).

<sup>29</sup> HIGGINBOTHAM, *supra* note 27, at 30.

<sup>30</sup> See DAVID BRION DAVIS, *CHALLENGING THE BOUNDARIES OF SLAVERY* 61–91 (2003).

<sup>31</sup> *See id.*

<sup>32</sup> See BUTLER, *supra* note 28, at 129–63.

of their sexual and reproductive lives, forcibly separated black men and black women whenever it suited the slaveholder's business interests, and seized at will the children to whom black women gave birth. Such familial relationships as enslaved people managed to create were subject at all times to the control of the slaveholder. Only with his permission were they allowed to form relationships.

Sociologist Donna Franklin, in an examination of gender relationships between enslaved men and women, shares records of freed black people's descriptions of the emotional confusion, pain, and sense of powerlessness created by this system.<sup>33</sup> One man reported this:

I myself had my wife on another plantation. The woman my master gave me had a husband on another plantation. Everything was mixed up. My other wife had two children for me, but the woman master gave me had no children. We were put in the same cabin, but both of us cried, me for my old wife, and she for her old husband.<sup>34</sup>

The system of slavery made very little room for human feelings, little room for love, among black people. Our great, great, great grandfathers and grandmothers could not develop the interdependency that characterized most loving marital and familial relationships. Men were powerless to take care of and protect women. Women were on their own. They had to be strong to take care of themselves and their children. And the children? Well, they were ever-present witnesses, as sociologist Orlando Patterson describes it, to the "daily degradation of their parents at the hands of the slaveholders."<sup>35</sup>

Pervasive cultural images spread—and reinforced—the lie of black inferiority. Minstrel shows, featuring white people in blackface, began touring the country in the 1840s and became the first form of national popular entertainment in the United States. The shows created a staple of images of black people that included the happy Sambo, the dumb Coon, the fat and obedient Mammy, and the black brute.<sup>36</sup> These images created stereotypes that eventually found their way into vaudeville and motion pictures, reinforcing the lie that black people are not as pretty, not as smart, not as lovable—stereotypes

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<sup>33</sup> DONNA L. FRANKLIN, WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?: UNDERSTANDING AND HEALING THE RIFT BETWEEN BLACK MEN AND WOMEN 27 (2000).

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> ORLANDO PATTERSON, RITUALS OF BLOOD: CONSEQUENCES OF SLAVERY IN TWO AMERICAN CENTURIES 40 (1998).

<sup>36</sup> See ETHNIC NOTIONS (California Newsreel 1987).

that still linger and still have negative effects on black children and black families.

In 2005, a young filmmaker conducted and filmed a test with a small group of black children.<sup>37</sup> The children were shown a black doll and a white doll and asked which doll they thought was nice and good. The majority of black children chose the white doll.<sup>38</sup> This experiment repeated the famous doll test first conducted in 1947 by psychologist Kenneth Clark and his wife, Mamie Clark.<sup>39</sup> The Clark study, in which a majority of the black children also chose the white doll, was proffered as evidence of black children's feelings of racial inferiority in the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education*.<sup>40</sup> The doll studies are controversial and have come under attack in recent years, but the short film that featured the 2005 doll test sparked a far-flung and spirited conversation within the black community that raised important questions about how black children today feel about being black.<sup>41</sup>

There are also serious questions about how black children feel about their intellectual abilities. The persistent black-white achievement gap in our nation's schools is a multi-faceted problem. There is growing evidence that among the contributing factors is the psychological impact of negative stereotypes. Studies conducted by psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson suggest that group stereotypes affect how black students see themselves and how they perform academically.<sup>42</sup> In one of the Steele and Aronson studies, equal numbers of African-American and white Stanford University students (who were matched with students with equivalent SAT scores) were given a thirty-minute standardized test.<sup>43</sup> Researchers told half the students that the test was a measure of academic ability.<sup>44</sup> The other half of the students were told that the test did not assess ability.<sup>45</sup> The African-American students who were told that the test was a measure of ability scored

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<sup>37</sup> A GIRL LIKE ME (Reel Works Teen Filmmaking 2005).

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> See *Brown v. Bd. of Educ.*, 347 U.S. 483, 494 n.11 (1954).

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., L.A. Johnson, *Documentary, Studies Renew Debate About Skin Color's Impact*, PITT. POST-GAZETTE, Dec. 26, 2006, at C1.

<sup>42</sup> See American Psychological Association Online, *Stereotype Threat Widens Achievement Gap*, July 15, 2006, <http://www.psychologymatters.org/stereotypethreat.html> (discussing Claude M. Steele & Joshua Aronson, *Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans*, 69 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 797 (1995), in addition to other related studies).

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

significantly lower than the white students.<sup>46</sup> The African-American students who thought that they were not being measured on ability earned scores equal to those of the white students.<sup>47</sup> The white students performed the same in each situation.<sup>48</sup>

This study and related studies suggest that negative stereotypes about black people's intellectual capabilities raise doubts and anxieties in the minds of black students about their abilities to perform, which in turn undermines their performance on tests.<sup>49</sup> The authors call this "stereotype vulnerability" or "stereotype threat," underscoring the notion that what people believe about themselves—how people feel about themselves—strongly affects how they behave in the world.<sup>50</sup>

The broad forces of history and discrete historical events affect real people, influence their feelings, and shape their attitudes. As psychologists Brenda Lane Richardson and Brenda Wade have put it, "Our history didn't just happen to a group of anonymous people. These people were our ancestors, and in many respects, they are part of us."<sup>51</sup>

Many of the feelings, beliefs, and attitudes held by our great, great, great grandparents were handed down—almost like family heirlooms—from one generation to the next. Our forebears passed on to us much that was good. Their legacy enabled black people to make extraordinary strides in the forty years since the official end of segregation. Yet we have also inherited some beliefs and attitudes that have been bad for us. One of these is the belief that black people are not as smart as white people, which may lead to persistent fears of failure. Another is that black people are not as attractive as white people, which, coupled with erroneous beliefs about intelligence, may contribute to a lowered sense of self-worth and self-love. Even in the year 2008, it is not unusual for a black person to let slip some statement about "good hair," suggesting that straight hair is better than "kinky" hair, or some

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<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> *See id.*

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> BRENDA LANE RICHARDSON & DR. BRENDA WADE, WHAT MAMA COULDN'T TELL US ABOUT LOVE xx (1999); *see also* Univ. of Va. Health Sys., Ctr. for the Study of the Mind & Human Interaction, Mission & Brief History, <http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/csmhi/mission.cfm> (chronicling the work of the now-defunct Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction, which was based on the premise that historical events and forces affect the behavior of groups and individuals).

statement describing light skin far more favorably than dark skin. Yet another damaging belief is that black men and black women cannot trust one another.

Once our forebears were freed, they rushed to marry and form families. What is undeniable, however, is that these marriages, and the families that grew out of them, continued to labor under the burden of the lie of black inferiority, as well as continuing racial and economic discrimination. At the formal end of slavery in 1865, a time when there was little or no understanding of the emotional impact of historical events on people's feelings, black people did not skip a beat. They married, they formed families, they got educated, they built lives, and they succeeded. But the emotional toll of what our great, great, great grandparents had gone through, and, to varying degrees, passed on to us, went largely uncounted. Not surprisingly, no time was taken to assess the impact of the lie of black inferiority on the ability of black people to love themselves and each other. No time was taken to attend to the business of recovery and healing.

At the formal end of legal segregation in the United States, which many historians mark at 1968 with the passage of the Fair Housing Act,<sup>52</sup> little time was taken to assess the emotional costs exacted by the system of Jim Crow, which lasted for over one hundred years after slavery and was premised on and continued to reinforce the lie of black inferiority. Little time was taken to assess the lie's impact on the inner lives of black people, or on relationships between black men and women, or on bonds between black parents and children. Except for an all-too-short-lived movement focused on the idea that "black is beautiful," little has been done on a large scale to confront and free ourselves from the lie of black inferiority.

For me, this makes all the more remarkable the success of so many black families. Black people have made extraordinary strides under the weight of the lie of black inferiority. I love to think how much we will be able to accomplish when we finally manage to free ourselves from it entirely. I love to think about that. The work of unburdening ourselves from the lie of black inferiority is long overdue. The alarming statistics regarding the state of the African-American family signal that, as a community, we have gone just about as far as we can without taking decisive action to free ourselves and our children.

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<sup>52</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 3601 (2006).

### III. TOWARD EMOTIONAL FREEDOM

When apartheid was brought to a legal end in South Africa, perhaps inspired by the example of what had not happened in the United States after the end of slavery and segregation, the government of South Africa sought to find a way to assess the toll that the system of racial separation had taken on the people of South Africa. We can learn a great deal from the South African experience.

The government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate crimes committed during apartheid.<sup>53</sup> The Commission had its flaws and did not please everyone. But, in establishing it, the government of South Africa evinced an understanding of the fact that historical events affect the emotions and behavior of groups of people and that people's feelings about the past can create barriers to moving forward. The government acknowledged the importance of creating a forum for people to speak and to be heard about the harms that apartheid had inflicted upon them.

Many people in South Africa went even further. Spurred perhaps by twentieth-century understandings of the impact of historical forces on people's inner lives, healing and reparations groups were established in communities across the country. Father Michael Lapsley, an Anglican priest and anti-apartheid activist, who had lost both hands and one of his eyes in a letter bomb attack, founded one of those healing groups, the Institute for the Healing of Memories.<sup>54</sup> "I noticed," he has said, "just how many people were damaged, in their humanity, damaged by what we had done, by what had been done to us, and by what we had failed to do. It seemed to me we all had a story to tell."<sup>55</sup>

Healing of Memories workshops were run in parallel with the Truth and Reconciliation process, with the explicit goal of helping to heal emotional wounds and promote interracial reconciliation. The workshops, which are still being offered today, are designed to "open up a space for dialogue about the past and its impact in the present" as "one step on the road towards healing."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See generally LYN S. GRAYBILL, TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: MIRACLE OR MODEL? (2002).

<sup>54</sup> Michele Gierck, *Transforming Victims into Victors*, EUREKA ST., Apr. 2, 2008, <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=6476>.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> UNDINE KAYSER, CTR. FOR THE STUDY OF VIOLENCE & RECONCILIATION & THE INST. FOR THE HEALING OF MEMORIES, CREATING A SPACE FOR ENCOUNTER AND REMEMBRANCE: THE HEALING OF

The emphasis of the workshops is on addressing issues at an emotional and spiritual level, as opposed to an intellectual one.<sup>57</sup>

Today in the United States there is a small but growing movement aimed at emotional and spiritual healing in the black community. It is focused on confronting and healing the emotional wounds inflicted by the lie of black inferiority. It is a movement being built at the grassroots level by organizations such as African American Family Services in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Mt. Aery Baptist Church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. African American Family Services is using a parenting curriculum as a resource for strengthening parents' and children's sense of self-worth. Its work is based on the premise that many black people are "trapped inside the prisons of self-hate" and that they "cannot start to love their families until they begin first, to love themselves."<sup>58</sup> Mt. Aery Baptist Church is one of many churches in the United States that each year presents the MAAFA, a psychodrama that combines music, poetry, dance, ritual, and prayer.<sup>59</sup> It takes participants and its audiences on a journey through black history to the present, showing how the lie of black inferiority is still alive and affecting the black community today.<sup>60</sup> Workshops such as "40 Days of Health and Wellness" are key components of the annual MAAFA experience.<sup>61</sup> According to Senior Pastor Dr. Anthony Bennett, "through the MAAFA ministry, we are educating our people about our history, addressing issues of race, self-hate, class, gender, and economics that impact those that come to our congregation."<sup>62</sup>

Inspired by the healing work being done in South Africa, Minneapolis, Bridgeport, and other places, my husband and I joined with other members of our church, St. Luke's Episcopal Church, and Christian Community Action, an ecumenical social services agency, to launch the Community Healing Network (CHN) in New Haven, Connecticut, in October 2006. The mission of CHN is to promote the emotional emancipation of black people—complete freedom,

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MEMORIES PROCESS (2000), <http://www.csvr.org.za/wits/papers/paphom.htm> (internal quotation marks omitted).

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*

<sup>58</sup> ENOLA G. AIRD ET AL., THE JAMESTOWN PROJECT, OUR FOUNDATIONAL COVENANT: STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY 19 (2007), available at <http://www.jamestownproject.org/images/stories/MediaEvents/family.pdf> (citation omitted) (internal quotation marks omitted). For more information about these organizations, see *id.* at 17–20.

<sup>59</sup> The Mount Aery Baptist Church, MAAFA, <http://www.mtaerybaptist.org/maafa.html> (last visited July 10, 2008).

<sup>60</sup> AIRD ET AL., *supra* note 58, at 17–18.

<sup>61</sup> *Id.* at 18.

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

not only in body, but also in mind and in spirit. The Network grew out of St. Luke's call to be a place of healing and seeks to share the balm of Christ's love and healing power to help black people overcome the lie of black inferiority. We want to help all black people see themselves as God sees them—as beautiful, lovable, intelligent, capable, valuable, and worthy.

The goals of the Community Healing Network are to raise the black community's awareness of the destructive, present-day effects of the lie of black inferiority; to share the spiritual resources of our faith to help people in our community free themselves from the lie; to provide practical workshops and programs to create opportunities for people to work together toward healing and wholeness; and to build a diverse network of faith communities, civic organizations, and mental health groups working in a coordinated way to promote individual and family healing and wellness in the black community.

Over the last two years, we have held a series of community conversations and healing services, and sponsored radio advertisements designed to raise public awareness. We are focused on issues of love and self-love, male-female relationships, motherhood, fatherhood, on helping young people explore history as a way of understanding the present, and on building stronger, healthier families. Working with Community Mediation, a local group focused on dispute resolution, we have developed a series of four community healing workshops designed to help people assess the effects of the lie of black inferiority on their emotional lives and begin a journey toward healing.<sup>63</sup> We are also working to establish an annual observance of Community Healing Days, during the third weekend of every October, to mobilize our community around issues of healing and renewal. The theme for the 2008 observance is "Seeing Black People in a Whole New Light." We do not know where this work will ultimately lead us, but we are intent on doing our part to help build a far-reaching movement for the emotional emancipation of black people.

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<sup>63</sup> These workshops are inspired by the work of the Institute for Healing of Memories, *see* Inst. for Healing of Memories, History, [http://www.healingofmemories.co.za/introduction/ihom\\_history.htm](http://www.healingofmemories.co.za/introduction/ihom_history.htm) (last visited Aug. 21, 2008); the Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction, *see* Univ. of Va. Health Sys., *supra* note 51; and Re-evaluation Counseling, *see* The International Re-evaluation Counseling Communities, About Re-evaluation Counseling, <http://www.rc.org> (last visited Aug. 21, 2008); and offer a process through which people of all ages and backgrounds can help each other overcome the effects of past experiences of distress. The Community Healing Network's workshops are designed to help participants (1) envision a future free of the lie of black inferiority and its correlate: the lie of white superiority; (2) assess the ways in which these lies are affecting the lives of black people today; (3) explore how the lies helped shaped our history and the emotional lives of our ancestors; and (4) discover and devise ways to finally free ourselves and our children from the lie of black inferiority and the lie of white superiority.

Much of the work of the budding national movement for emotional freedom is being done, as it must be, by black people and by African-American institutions at the local level. But we cannot do it alone. We need the help of our fellow Americans.

Law and religion are powerful forces. They can work together for ill and they can work together for good. Just as law and religion worked hand-in-hand to support the dehumanization and enslavement of African people, they also worked together to promote abolition and build the civil rights movement. The organizers of this silver anniversary symposium have asked that we apply our prophetic voices to the subject of law, religion, and the future of the African-American family. In that spirit, I will venture to say that over the next twenty-five years, we will see religion and law work together in fresh, powerful, and creative ways to help heal and renew the African-American family as more and more black people turn to faith communities, civic groups, and mental health organizations in their neighborhoods to help them create new and exciting community-based initiatives aimed at intra-racial healing.

There is much to be done within the African-American community and outside of the community. Our fellow Americans can contribute by doing their part to help extinguish the lie of black inferiority, and, with it, its correlate: the lie of white superiority. Groups outside of the black community can work toward interracial healing and reconciliation by joining together to explore and build upon the important work that Peggy McIntosh, Tim Wise, and others are doing to help dismantle “white privilege.”<sup>64</sup>

Our government can do its part by acknowledging, at long last, the profound harm done to the black family throughout American history and by establishing a new agenda for racial justice and reconciliation that focuses on strengthening the African-American family. A number of arguments have been offered in recent years to support claims for reparations for black people. From my point of view, the strongest case for reparations is the emotional, psychological, and spiritual case. The greatest harm done to black people was—and still is—the harm inflicted on our hearts, minds, and spirits by the lie of black inferiority. Its diabolical genius was what it did—and continues to do—to undermine our abilities to love ourselves and to love each other.

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<sup>64</sup> See Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (Anna Wilder Phelps Fund, Chicago, Illinois, Working Paper No. 189), available at [http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/23/1e/8c.pdf](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/23/1e/8c.pdf); TIM J. WISE, *WHITE LIKE ME: REFLECTIONS ON RACE FROM A PRIVILEGED SON* (2005).

A new agenda for racial justice focused on rebuilding the African-American family should include bold educational initiatives to extinguish the lies of black inferiority and white superiority, new programs to end continuing racial discrimination and persistent economic inequalities, *and* creative initiatives to support healthy, nurturing relationships, marriages, and families, with special attention to the emotional and mental health wellness of individuals and families, and community healing programs.

Whatever others may or may not do to help the African-American family, I believe that during the next twenty-five years black people will build a powerful movement for emotional emancipation, rooted in our knowledge of God's love for us. In time, we will find healing and restoration, and we will free our community—and the world—of all vestiges of the lie of black inferiority, changing the image of black people forever. To do this, we will have to confront our pain and do the hard work necessary to heal and renew our families. But we can leave our children no greater legacy. *We will* do it. I know this because we are the descendants of the people who made a way out of no way.

