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Let Me Speak

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Sent: Thursday, June 04, 2020 9:44 AM

 To: [Steve Johnston](#)
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The first sentence is always the hardest, especially when you are telling a story about yourself, and the words are fresh. These past few days have shaken me. **I've taken some time to reflect on my place in this movement.** How do I contribute to moving this work forward? How do we continue having a collective impact? All of these questions, and more, pondered in my head while doing the work and supporting those on the front lines continuing this necessary yet difficult agenda.

Then, I knew that June was coming. **It's pride month when we celebrate the LGBTQ+ community and allies.** To be honest, I've been anxious about this month coming at a time like this one. Both of my identities are now at the forefront of conversation, which is difficult to manage. **Being black and gay is extremely difficult during this time.**

When we started Profound Gentlemen in June of 2015, I had only invited my dad and best friend into my life, or what some people would say, "coming out." On the 17th of that month, The Charleston Shooting happened. This turned the world upside down along with the many other killings that occurred that year. People took to the streets in anger. We were furious at home, seeing that something like this can still happen.

Nine days later, on June 26th, broadcasted on National tv, [President Obama delivered the eulogy of Clementa Pinckney's funeral when he graciously sang, "Amazing Grace."](#) That was a unifying moment for black people. We all felt the pain and the triumph of our ancestors at that moment. It was beautiful and gave me the strength to move forward to do the work of Profound Gentlemen. **I felt that I had an even greater responsibility to establish safes spaces and a cradle to career pipeline for boys of color.**

Later that day, lights representing the rainbow illuminated onto the walls of the White House. It symbolically represented what happened that day. **The U.S. Supreme**

Court struck down all state bans on same-sex marriage, legalizing in all fifty states. I was proud. On both days, I celebrated my blackness and sexuality, but that quickly came to a halt. It left me torn.

While celebrating the legalization of gay marriage, **I was verbally attacked by the people I just established community with earlier that day.** I heard and read the hateful messages like “you’re going to hell” and “God doesn’t like gay people.” At that moment, I wanted them to extend grace because the truth is that this was new for all of us. Instead, it was met with hate and discontentment.

I also felt like I couldn’t receive help from the people of which I celebrated the legalization. They were attacking me for my race. It almost seemed like it was their moment to celebrate, and we had no place in it. Not to mention, the LGBTQ+ community had years of marginalizing black people within the movement. I was stuck in the middle. It’s years of historical marginalization of always being stuck in the middle and never really “fitting in” neither group. Take, for example, the AIDS epidemic in the ’80s. Both black neighborhoods and the LGBTQ+ turned its back on the black LGBTQ+ community. **Today, we are still paying the price for that.** The black gay community still represents the highest percentage of those infected and impacted by HIV and AIDS. We are still dealing with it today.

As we recognize the fifth anniversary of both the Charleston Shooting and Legalization of Same-Sex marriage, I can acknowledge that some change has been made, but we have a long way to go. I think that it’s our duty to start in the field of education. **Often in black and Latino male spaces, sexuality and masculinity separate us.** Even in K-12, males of color typically choose the boy that is more “masculine” to participate in school-based activities. We ignore the one that is seen as more feminine. Some of us can recall our own experiences in K-12 spaces where we felt left out. I believe that where there is conflict, there is an opportunity. We have the opportunity in this organization to change that.

Black and Latino gay males have been marginalized in this country for years. To create a space for us to be both our most authentic selves and to have a voice is almost a foreign concept. I wouldn’t even give justice in this conversation to lay out the barriers and hurt that we experience daily. Many of us can’t hide who we are. Something as simply walking down the street to a corner store can be dangerous. The whispers and stares that you receive for something that you can’t control is daunting. **Despite all of this, you still teach. You’re still active in the community fight for change. I see you!**

A part of Pride month is not only recognizing the same-gender-loving people, but also our allies. However, as much as there are challenges in being a black gay male, I want to name that being a black male ally comes with its own set of issues. Though the experiences are vastly different and you can choose when you want to display ally-hood, I’ve witnessed some of my friends, Impact Leaders, and Gentlemen being attacked for simply accepting people. I’ve seen men who are and aren’t apart of the LGBTQ community label them as gay or on the down-low **and yet these guys continue to stand against injustices!** That too is due to a system wherein the

black community, it's hard to come out, so there is a silence and quiet movement to not get "caught." This impact black males who aren't gay but want to support the cause. They, too, have been targeted, and unfortunately, it's much harder for black straight males to be allies than any other group.

Together, in this organization, we will meet right where the lines are drawn, and ask ourselves the question, how do we establish a cradle to career pipeline for ALL boys of color? Due to this, in the past, I've been asked if Profound Gentlemen is a "gay" organization. At the time, I couldn't answer that because it's as much as a straight organization as it is a gay organization. It's as much as a black organization as it is a Latino organization. It's as much as a conservative organization as much as it is a liberal organization. As long as you're not negatively impacting someone else's growth, you are welcomed. However, for some reason, when it deals with sexuality in male spaces, we tend to stray away from the topic. If I answered that question today, I would say, "damn right, it is!" I would say the same if someone asked if it was straight or liberal. We allow the marginalized in male communities and spaces to have a voice by any means.

Let me speak.

Let allies speak up.

Let those that are hurt speak up.

Let those that feel like they never have a place to call home to speak up and let those that are just now figuring it out to speak up.

Let those who can't come out due to the dangers of the community around them be able to speak in this safe space!

It's uncomfortable yet necessary for us to create these spaces. Many of us are just now being introduced to people and experiences that we didn't grow up. This work takes time, and I believe PG is the place to make it happen.

On November 21st, 2015, I decided to speak up. Forged by fire, I created my lane and inviting folks into my life. It was a tough decision. I knew as a co-founder, and Chief Impact Officer of an up and coming organization folks would marginalize me, this organization, and even Jason, co-founder of PG. I was told not to "come out" because that would damage my reputation and that I wouldn't get far. Well, here we are, named 2017 Forbes Under 30 and over 500 males of color in our organization later and I AINT stoppin'. I didn't "come out" because of me. I did it for the young boy who believes that the only way to be successful is to hide, and I don't mean just hiding their sexuality.

Many of our boys hide living a life without a father.

Our boys hide wanting to do the arts instead of sports.

Our boys hide their tears because someone told them that to be a man, they can't cry.

In all of my achievements, I'm still marginalized. There have been times this year that I was not invited to the table simply because of my sexuality. I have received hate mail and crazy-ass emails from folks who believe that I should "calm it down." To be a leader in this work, in my shoes, it's hard. Though I don't tell you all everything that goes on, I know that the Gentlemen in this work are fighting to change the narrative! I see Gentlemen a part of the LGBTQ+ and allies redefine the narrative! This is why we cannot stop!

My point is that although some of us live in the middle of two experiences, together the Gentlemen in this organization can do this! We truly have a special group! Everyday I witness the actions of our Gentlemen coming together to create change! **We have an opportunity to continue moving the agenda forward for ALL black and Latino males!**

I call on the ancestors of James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin, and Langston Hughes, who were freedom fighters. I ask them to guide those that are same gender loving folks, folks who internally know themselves but can't invite other folks into their lives and those that are allies. This work, specifically during this time is difficult yet necessary. **I am proud, but I am also mad as hell. Let's do the work.**

Lastly, [attached](#) you will find a resource to help you understand your place in the movement. Jason shared it with me during our exec call. It is amazing! Know that these thoughts only represent my experience. I invite you to ask others about their experience.

Little fun fact - Impact Leader, Demetrius Lancaster, helped me to actually invite others into my life. We both had our inviting-in moment in 2015. Randomly his inviting-in moment was on June 21st which is my birthday. Mine was on November 21st which is his birthday! We did not plan this!

Impactfully Yours,

Mario Jovan Shaw
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