

Losing a Giant's Shoulders to Stand on: Will We Still be Able to See the Forest for the Trees?

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"If I stand tall it is because I stand on the shoulders of my ancestors."

Yoruba Proverb

Recently while sitting on a federal advisory committee charged with advising the Secretary of Health and Human Services on routinely collected health statistics, I discovered something quite surprising. The federal government does not measure on an ongoing basis our population's level of happiness or emotional well-being. Even more surprising, the National Institute of Mental Health has a mission not to study how to keep us happy, but rather how to prevent and treat pathology. I remember that day trying to tell everyone who would listen that I thought this was absolutely crazy. That is when I realized, again, that if I was going to win this battle I needed to stand on a foundation of White male privilege that causes the masses to listen and take serious a call to action. George had many of the attributes that should have given him a tin ear. He was a White male, a past APA President, a former department chair with layers of privilege that could insulate him, if he chose, from the tsuris around him. But he was always happy to share his privilege in the name of a just public interest cause.

The fact that George was the one individual who came to mind at that moment was not an accident. George was always a respected letter writer for tenure reviews of individuals whose work challenged mainstream psychology to be more responsive to racial or ethnic minorities. When we as women or racial/ethnic minorities wrote about these issues it was often seen as political and personal

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even though it was published in respected peer reviewed journals. George often came to the rescue by placing the work in its proper perspective (Mays & Albee, 1992). George was our advocate for appointments to APA committees when others thought that minorities and women were too radical to have a seat at the table. George was often the translator, the bridge, the connection and the activist who always with good humor helped others to understand that social stresses, such as unemployment, violence, racism, or sexism, are harmful to our mental health. George, as a truth sayer, was able to challenge the profession of psychology from the hallways of APA to the corridors of the National Institute of Mental Health to make room in our science for diversity of thought that women and racial/ethnic minorities bring to a social justice agenda.

In 1969, as an undergraduate at Loyola University of Chicago, I was fortunate to attend a meeting of the Association of Black Psychologist/National Black Student Psychological Association that was purposely being held in conjunction with the Miami APA convention. That meeting forever changed my relationship with APA. As an undergraduate, I had served as the President of the National Black Student Psychological Association (BSPA) and had helped to develop the Chicago Chapter of the Association of Black Psychologists. But I had little real exposure to the world of APA. APA in the late 60's seemed unwelcoming to new voices. Convention submissions by Black psychologists studying topics not in the mainstream were often rejected. Journals published articles that were often criticized to no avail by Black psychologists. And APA seemed to do nothing to ensure that Black students could enroll and graduate from psychology Ph.D. programs. At that stage of my career I had no intention of ever attending APA conventions and was quite content to see myself, as did many other Black psychologists at the time, as exclusively attending the Association of Black Psychology (ABPsi) annual meetings. However, the 1969 Miami Annual Convention over which George presided as President proved to be a historical moment for APA, ABPsi, and BSPA. The leadership of these two organizations met with George and confronted APA about their lack of responsiveness and commitment to the training of Black Psychologists (Sullivan et al., 1992). APA listened and began a path of change.

I also remember in 1988 when the HIV/AIDS epidemic was in its infancy and the voices of White gay men as well as the biomedical establishment prevailed. I felt very strongly that psychology could be a major contributor to combating AIDS but seeding an organized response needed a venue (Mays, 1989). George offered the Vermont Primary Prevention Conference without even a worry of whether we would get enough psychologists to attend to make it financially worthwhile. He did so because he understood immediately that HIV infection prevention needed psychologists to focus on methods of reducing the vulnerability of the marginalized in this country (Mays, Albee, & Schneider, 1989). For George, HIV/AIDS prevention efforts included many of the same ingredients that are needed to keep this country mentally healthy. There had to be a focus on oppression and

marginalization. There had to be interventions to reduce the toxicity of an environment contaminated by racism, sexism, economic oppression, stigma, and heterosexism. George believed this at a time where many were focused on finding a vaccine or some other biomedical cure and had yet to appreciate the contribution of behavior and context to the spread of HIV infection (Mays & Albee, 1989a,b,c). This meeting, the first behavioral meeting on AIDS, was well attended in part because many psychologists were already familiar with the substantive innovation of the Vermont meetings (Mays et al., 1989).

There is a Yoruba proverb that says “If I stand tall it is because I stand on the shoulder of ancestors.” George had the shoulders on which I, and many others, stood and still stand. So many times throughout my career I have heard George’s voice in his writings, his talks, when I was girding to fight the good fight. His passing is the loss of a stalwart ally, a man who dedicated his career to trying to right the wrongs he saw so clearly and to challenge the prevailing focus on treating mental health disorders instead of preventing them in the first place. While I will cherish all of my memories of the delightful times that I spent with George eating grand meals, being fully entertained, and basking in the warmth of his wonderful hospitality, I will especially miss his presence in the field of psychology. It is colleagues like George who provide the strength and foundation for us all to be brave, bold, and brazen in our demands of equal treatment and equal access in psychology. George, we will miss you.

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