PART ONE

THE ANATOMY OF INVISIBILITY

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

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INVISIBLE MEN

The Sixth Sense—Bill's Story

At forty-seven, Bill was part of the promising wave of poor-but-working-class black men who had made it into the middle class. Well-spoken and self-assured, he graduated from Yale in the late 1960s, served as an Army officer in Vietnam, and worked his way up the corporate ladder to a highly paid management position in a major American corporation.

He first came to see me because his son was having trouble in school, but it quickly became obvious that his son was having trouble with Bill. In fact, he was giving his whole family a hard time. He ranted at his son and daughter when they fought, minimized their conflicts, and told them to solve their problems on their own. He and his wife had grown increasingly distant, and the atmosphere at home was charged with tension and stress. He frequently came home from work withdrawn and impatient. Whenever he talked to his wife about his difficulties on the job, he told her angrily that she made him feel worse, misunderstood, and unsupported.

After about five weeks of family therapy a breakthrough occurred. During our session Bill revealed a disturbing incident, one that had unleashed an emotional firestorm. The night before, he had taken a white business client to an expensive restaurant in midtown Manhattan. When Bill told the maître d' they were there for dinner, the man looked right past him and asked his guest whether they had reservations. When

the meal was over the waiter picked up Bill's American Express Gold Card, but then returned it with the charge slip to Bill's client.

Bill imagined how his father, a tough city bus driver who never let such racial slights go by, would have exploded at the waiter. But Bill, fearful of creating an embarrassing scene, simply reached over and signed the slip while continuing to chat amiably with his client.

The two men walked out into the night and shook hands, reaffirming their agreement on a major contract. It should have been a sweet moment: The agreement put Bill in line for a major promotion. The white client stepped to the curb and effortlessly hailed a cab. Fifteen minutes later Bill was still at the curbside with his hand up, while white men and women flowed around him to hail cabs of their own. Finally, after yet another cab passed him up in favor of a white couple, Bill flung himself across the hood, swearing and flailing his attaché case at the driver's window.

All evening he had struggled to contain his anger. He felt that he was being seen not as himself but as a stereotype—first, as too insignificant to host a client at an expensive restaurant, and then as too dangerous to be let into a cab. Later, he felt that his explosion of rage merely reinforced the stereotypes of menace, only further contributing to his invisibility.

Invisibility Defined

This was hardly the first time that an African American man in therapy had told me of race-related indignities. I believe that every black man, if you ask him, can describe comparable experiences in the pit of racism that happened either to him or to someone in his circle of family and friends. These experiences accumulate to create a feeling of invisibility.

Invisibility is an inner struggle with feeling that one's talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or recognized because of prejudice and racism. Conversely, we feel visible when our true talents, abilities, personality, and worth are respected.

Obviously, Bill was not literally invisible. But being seen not as himself, and what's more, as utterly insignificant, infuriated him.

As I suspected, Bill's parents and relatives had made a point of teaching him from childhood how to detect and deal with racism. His older brothers and sisters threw in their opinions based on their experiences. Friends freely gave their personal guidelines based on what they learned through their own life experiences. Usually, with all of this input to draw on, Bill was able to navigate the hidden minefield of racism in the workplace. He had developed an invulnerability of sorts—an internal sense of being powerful enough to anticipate negative racial experiences, protect himself if necessary, and control his responses. But instead of protecting his dignity that night, his sixth sense had failed, and failing ignited a firestorm.

Most African American men understand what Bill went through. Daily acts of scorn are such a part of our experience that, early on, we develop a sixth sense or gut level sensor to detect contempt, slight, and innuendo in our encounters with other people. Invisibility is burdensome to black men's souls because it implies that we have been tricked, deceived, or compromised into humiliation, disgrace, or victimization. Feeling invisible, we have no dignity, and preserving our dignity is paramount.

Unfortunately, the effect of invisibility is that it links our self-respect to our ability to "read" (that is, to figure out) other people's intentions so that we can properly handle any racial situation we find ourselves in. Any shortcoming must be hidden behind a mask of indifference. The alternative is not much better: to fight aggressively to preserve what we think of ourselves. Either way, if you are an invisible man, to use novelist Ralph Ellison's timeless phrase, protecting your self-respect is a full-time job. It requires vigilance at all times, being careful in the evaluation of opportunities, and being assertive about personal goals in spite of what others think.

But all that effort can leave us at even greater risk, cool on the surface but underneath, lonely and confused. The following stories—indeed, the most common I hear from my clients—illustrate the dilemmas that are the outcome of risk to our formative selves.

Confused about How to "Be"—Tee's Dilemma

Tee, a dark-skinned ninth grader, could have been any black mother's son. He was obviously a bright kid. For years he repeatedly told teachers he wanted more instruction and homework in his favorite subjects. But almost every time he expressed his interest in math and science he got a quizzical look from his teachers. They would respond with insinuations about how difficult the subject was and how much he would have to study.

Since he stood six-four, his teachers instead encouraged him to play basketball. He liked the game. It was fun, but he was not interested in competing on a school team. He continued to surprise teachers with his membership in the science and math club even though he became resigned to their attitudes. Tee and his mother had been waging this war against having his interests subverted since he started school. From independent testing they knew his intelligence and talents were exceptional. Nevertheless, he believed his teachers treated him as "the dumb black kid," or "jock."

Buttressed by his mother's support, Tee persisted in his academic interests, although he frequently felt like an oddball around his teachers. Among his black peers he was called a "brainiac," and was accused of trying to act white by being smart. He felt out of place and had to work hard to fit in on his terms. Except for his mother, he found few supporters.

Tee was not socially isolated. On the contrary, he was well-liked, and part of the school's social network. To accomplish this acceptance, however, he gradually learned to suppress his talents. In order to not appear to be such an oddity, he hung out with the "brothers," tried to "stay loose," and performed in class in a way that didn't overwhelm his teachers with his ability.

Tee was finding that he had to decide over and over again how he was going to be. His mother's, friends', and teachers' opinions and beliefs put a lot of pressure on him.

"Black boys get treated differently," his mother warned him. This was true. Or at least he began to feel that way. He could sense there was some truth in her passion, although her overprotective behavior

embarrassed him when she thought the treatment he received was unfair and racially motivated.

As Tee struggled to craft a definition of himself that rose above the presumptions of people who had a real measure of control over him, he experienced an acute sense of invisibility. Boys like Tee find their way through the day with a sheer veil covering their eyes. They can see, but not with clarity. One moment they believe that they're headed in the right direction, and the next moment they're not so certain. People they rely on turn out to offer ambiguous and misleading cues about their strengths and direction.

Young black males who are less fortunate and supported than Tee can feel even more disoriented, exhausted at an early age by the effort it takes just to try to be accepted on their own terms. Take Carl for example, a twenty-six-year-old student government leader attending a well-known college.

Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't—Carl's Dilemma

After struggling through high school, Carl reluctantly earned his GED in an alternative public school program. He bounced from low-paying job to low-paying job and quickly became dissatisfied. Many of his friends were either headed to or just getting out of jail.

Sensing that Carl was drifting, his grandfather, a former navy man, urged him to join. Initially Carl resisted; but suddenly he relented and bought into his grandfather's sales pitch that it was an opportunity to see the world. What is more, Carl felt the uniform would give him recognition and a feeling of importance. But he thought little about how life would be in the navy.

Months after he joined, he found himself at sea with a group of young sailors whose acceptance of him was inconsistent at best. He frequently found himself excluded from social activities. All of the officers were white, and the few sailors of color blew hot and cold in their desire to have exclusive black friendships. Those black sailors who so-

cialized only with each other were viewed, sometimes suspiciously, as different and loners. At times he felt accepted by them, and at other times they were suspicious of what was seen as his unusual friendliness with some white sailors.

Carl's grandfather had urged him to expand his horizons beyond his blackness, so he was not sure how he should act. Consequently, he would become whatever the people he was with wanted him to be at the time. As far as making friends and getting along with his fellow sailors, he felt as if he kept stubbing his toe as he tried to get along with different groups and follow the navy "team" credo—all while trying to be true to his grandfather's vision for him.

Carl tried hard not to allow the assumptions others held about him to overly affect the way he behaved. Ironically, his behavior helped reaffirm the opinions others held about him. This is the old "damned if you do, damned if you don't" dilemma. Trying to reconcile too many warring views created confusion and frustration, derailing his aspirations.

Wondering, *Why Bother?*—Kofi's Dilemma

"Hi, I'm Chris, but my friends call me Kofi." The handsome young man entered my office and extended his hand in greeting. He went on to say he was twenty-eight years old and that he felt that his life was drifting nowhere in particular. He wanted help getting back into school.

Kofi knew his parents wanted him to be proud of his heritage and make something of himself. Until he entered high school, Kofi attended a small private school run by an African American educator, where he was immersed in African and African American history as part of his basic education. He identified the transition to high school as one of the most difficult periods in his life.

His conflict began when he listened to a high school teacher talk about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s winning of the Nobel Peace Prize and having a national holiday designated for him. In Kofi's view, the teacher related nothing of substance about the civil rights struggle central to Dr. King's accomplishments. Soon the depth of Kofi's understanding of African American history brought him into conflict with

his teachers, who grew annoyed with his objections and challenges to their points of view. His parents supported this speaking up, which inevitably got him labeled as a difficult, albeit promising, student.

In standing up for values that were emphasized at home, Kofi had to deal with teachers who he felt disregarded those values. This was a dilemma throughout high school that twisted, rather than shaped his feelings about himself. He did not like being trapped between the two views of the world that he experienced at home and at school. Kofi felt his parents' "pushing me to have this black consciousness" became too frustrating. It got him in trouble at school where he was labeled a troublemaker. His parents, his teachers, and his minister all had divergent ideas about how he should behave, and his response to the conflicting cues was a resounding "Why bother?" By the time Kofi reached college, the pattern was set. Full of frustration, he dropped out in his second year.

Invisibility obscures personal vision. Assumptions and stereotypes that come from inside *and* outside our communities made it difficult for Kofi to achieve a balanced perspective on being black and male. Struggling constantly to maintain his self-esteem, he sought activities and alliances that allowed him to coexist with others, with the least amount of stress and with the maximum amount of dignity.

When you see a black man making choices or taking risks that aren't necessarily in his best interest, you can be fairly sure that those actions are making him feel valued above what others around him presume to be the small measure of his worth.

In Kofi, a sense of invisibility clouded his judgment and altered his ability to evaluate his stature and movement toward personal goals. Invisibility created a heightened sensitivity to indignities. It led to his questioning his own judgment about how others treated him, about how he fit into situations, and about how to conduct himself.

Second-Guessing—Sean's Dilemma

Persistent second-guessing sucks hope out of the air, undermines the will, and breaks the spirit. Sean, a thirty-six-year-old attorney, recently told me that even within the black community he is constantly on guard

about other people's reactions to him. What, he wondered aloud, will the sisters he meets think and feel about him? What will other brothers think and feel? He also wondered how he will be treated outside the black community. Will he be accepted? What impression is he making? He feels that his survival is threatened by his inability to correctly read hidden messages coded into each encounter.

It is all too easy for men like Sean to feel like victims of society, rather than vital, contributing members of it. If persistent self-doubt destroys their personal vision, they can gradually become nobodies instead of somebody.

The Invisibility Syndrome—Signs and Symptoms of Living Under Siege

Bill, Tee, Carl, Kofi, and Sean are examples of a phenomenon that Dr. Chester Pierce, an African American psychiatrist with a distinguished career at Harvard University, calls *micro-aggressions.* I explained micro-aggressions in an article I wrote for the January 2000 *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry.* They are subtle acts or attitudes that are experienced as hostile, and that fit a history and pattern of personal racial slights and disregard. They act as status reminders by their implicit suggestion of our unworthiness. They convey a "Stay in your place" message.

A life history of micro-aggressions would make anyone extremely vigilant about personal dignity and self-respect. As these stories show, perpetual vigilance is stressful and tips some men toward counterproductive and dysfunctional behavior. Experiences of invisibility—i.e., the micro-aggressions or slights—are like viruses in the atmosphere. As a psychologist to black men, I'm alert for the symptoms. The more of them I see in a client, the greater is the likelihood that the virus of invisibility has already worked its way into his relationships and dreams, and that what started out like a cold has turned into pneumonia.

I've seen invisibility affecting black men in a variety of ways. The signs and symptoms that can begin to pile up include:

- Frustration
- Increased awareness of perceived slights

- Chronic indignation
- Pervasive discontent and disgruntlement
- Anger
- Immobilization or increasing inability to get things done
- Questioning one's worthiness
- Disillusionment and confusion
- Feeling trapped
- Conflicted racial identity
- Internalized rage
- Depression
- Substance abuse
- Loss of hope

The invisibility syndrome—the term I coined for this cluster of debilitating symptoms originating from profound reactions to perceived racial slights—limits the effective utilization of personal resources, the achievement of individual goals, the establishment of positive relationships, the satisfaction of family interactions, and the potential for life satisfaction.

In short, the invisibility syndrome consists of ever-increasing behavior, feelings, and thoughts that reduce your ability to accomplish goals, to form positive relationships with important people in your life, to be happy, and to fulfill your dreams.

Men experiencing the invisibility syndrome live as if they were under siege. They have a hard time distinguishing racial slights from other kinds of problems. Whenever their judgment is brought into question, they shut down emotionally. As a result, they lose their capacity for intimacy with family and friends. They feel even more embattled and guarded in the workplace. But they won't admit it.

The Progression of Symptoms: Falling Deeper into Invisibility

This book explores the sources, unfinished business, and ongoing tension underlying these symptoms. It also shows how they progress, if they are left unchecked.

Stage One: Frustration

During childhood we start to respond to the annoying conventional wisdom about how tough life is if you're black and male. To a child, these innocuous warnings are frustrating parental rules. But the invisibility syndrome starts with confusion, then self-doubting in association with racial identity and gender, because at an age when praise and approval from parents and others is crucial to positive identity formation, we learn that our behavior as a black boy disturbs other people and we must beware. We instinctively gear up to reduce these frustrations by creating our own rules for making it in the world. These early behaviors form the origin of our "brotherhood rules," our standards for respect.

Stage Two: Uncertainty

By adolescence we may become sensitive to slights and quick to get upset. A teen who is vulnerable to invisibility will have a chip on his shoulder. He will try to be cool, but have difficulty manipulating the way he wants to be seen as a man as he struggles with the realities of two dominant worlds in his life, black and white. He will attempt to conceal his inner nature, and harden his stance.

As the risks to our welfare increase, our mothers, preoccupied about our safety, reduce attention to teaching us adult responsibilities. Our parents' narrow focus in raising black boys to manhood (sometimes spoken of as "love our sons, raise our daughters") is at the expense of learning in a benign environment, where, for example, the values of attachment and commitment would develop more freely if they were linked to intimacy more than to safeguarding survival. Thus our personal safety dominates our concerns, attachments, and commitments as we stride toward manhood.

Stage Three: Conflict

Young men who are struggling with invisibility play with various identities, casting about for the proper one that works for them. They usually drink to lessen their pain and gain relief, self-medicating their uncertainty.

Some delve into other risky self-assuring behaviors. Some men will move on to greater substance abuse. Others may seek resolution through chameleonlike behavior, a person with many different public faces.

Passionate avoidance of being associated with stereotypes can result in our ignoring genuine needs. Many young black men will not ask for help in school, because it is assumed that such requests validate unflattering beliefs about our intelligence or the worth of men of African descent in general. What we are unable to do academically we do socially, developing our ability to chill, party, and "talk to the ladies." Having "fine mamas" by our side gives us recognition and creates a comfort zone in the company of other men, and temporarily quells inner demons.

Stage Four: Denial and Guilt

As invisibility becomes a theme in our lives, so does denial and guilt as we wrestle with our indignation. With a rising sense of helplessness, we sabotage relationships, avoid commitments, and deny responsibilities. We keep invisibility at bay by reducing our exposure to unfamiliar challenges and the company of people different from ourselves. Living perpetually behind a mask of bravado or indifference, we compromise our personal power, while privately battling micro-aggressions, real or imagined.

Personal Power: The Key to Surviving Invisibility

What is personal power, and how does it mitigate invisibility?

Seven important elements add up to a sense of personal power. Internalized, they enable us to remain grounded, no matter what's happening to us:

1. **Recognition**
2. **Satisfaction**
3. **Legitimacy**
4. **Validation**

5. **Respect**
6. **Dignity**
7. **Identity**

It's a reasonable assumption that compromising these elements subverts our attempts to be the kind of men we want to be. A closer look at this assumption reveals the fundamental road blocks to our emotional health.

Recognition: The Power of Feeling You Are Being Acknowledged by Others

Kevin walked into his first meeting as a union representative and surveyed the room, only to see that he was just one of a handful of people of color. As he made his way into the room, threading through the crowd, no one approached him or gave him any sign of recognition. He found himself automatically moving in the direction of a black person talking to someone on the other side of the room.

"Hi, is this your first meeting?" Kevin was relieved to hear the voice.

He turned and saw that the person was addressing another representative walking just behind.

"Okay! I'll wait and see if he greets me," Kevin thought. But the man didn't. In fact he escorted this new representative toward others for introductions. Kevin knew it would be a long night.

Whereas we might attribute Kevin's experience to a variety of benign reasons, it fit a historical category of racial encounters that made him wonder about how genuinely he was accepted wherever he went—and that also included how family members recognized and treated him at home.

Recognition is essential for feeling acknowledged. Its absence forced Kevin to look for other places that would provide it. If he didn't feel acknowledged or appreciated at home, he would look outside the home. If he didn't feel acknowledged in his community, he would establish link-

ages outside the community. If a child were like Kevin and didn't feel that teachers gave him sufficient recognition in class, he would look to fellow students in or out of class to provide the recognition.

If we don't find something in the workplace that fulfills our need for recognition, either we do our work grudgingly or we leave. Recognition can come in the form of simply being warmly welcomed at a business reception, or it can mean being recognized as employee of the month.

One way or another, we will get the amount of recognition we desire. It is a fundamental need. If we don't feel sufficiently recognized as professionals, we go out and start our own professional organizations. If we do not feel welcome in local establishments, we create our own hangouts in innumerable places—barbershops, street corners, and card games—just to feel recognized and a part of something. But that doesn't change our deeper sense of wariness in the wider world.

When you understand a black man's history of lack of recognition, you are beginning to understand him. The recognition you are giving him may seem appropriate to you, but it may not be enough to overcome his history of slights.

Satisfaction: The Power of Feeling Rewarded for What You Do

James knew he was a damn good technician. But he rarely felt satisfied enough to say, "I like this job!" Every time something went wrong with the equipment people came running to him for answers. But no matter how often he demonstrated what his coworkers called "another one of James's miracles," he always felt used. He never was rewarded for his genius, nor did it really elevate his stature within the workplace. Everyone was friendly, but he always felt a little on the outside with both his white and black coworkers. He felt the white coworkers were threatened by his skills and the blacks were envious of his reputation as the technical wizard. There was no convincing James that things would not have been different if he were a white man with the same talents.

James wanted more than recognition as the "fix-it man." He gained little satisfaction from a reputation that led to no substantial rewards in the workplace. His fame was a hollow acknowledgment of his talents.

Black men like James are more likely to get the kind of consistent engagement that produces satisfaction by coming together in our sanctuaries, be they barbershops or churches, than by going to work. Places of brotherhood create more reliable circumstances for genuine recognition that is especially gratifying.

Legitimacy: The Power of Feeling That You Belong

If you're getting enough recognition and satisfaction, you tend to feel "this is where I should be."

Teddy, who had just transferred from a large midwestern state school to Hampton University, an historically black university, made that comment to me. It was not only the size of the state school that contributed to Teddy's decision to transfer out, but the fact that he did not experience acceptance among the student body.

Sonny, another young man for whom belonging was key to satisfaction, was one of the employees at a plant where people of color constituted only 10 percent of the workforce. Men of African descent were an even smaller minority. In his second year at the job, Sonny knew most of the employees of color as either friends or passing acquaintances. His skills were highly regarded and he was the beneficiary of workplace rewards, but he couldn't help feeling that this wasn't the right place for him. The talk around the plant was that workers of color had only recently been hired in any noticeable numbers. Moreover, he was privy to too many informal discussions among the African American men at the job about how uneasy they felt around the white workers. Sonny found himself second-guessing his decision to select this job over another where African American men were less isolated and where the atmosphere was more welcoming. He had chosen this job because it paid more money. Now he wondered if money should be the driving decision in selecting a place of employment.

Feeling that they belonged in the big picture was crucial to Teddy and Sonny. Any manager or diversity officer at a school or workplace would do well to understand this. Institutions that recruit African American men need to know that many of the activities and places we gravitate toward and remain loyal to can be understood in terms of how legitimate they make us feel.

This shouldn't surprise anyone, since there are many analogous situations. A primary recruitment strategy of inner city gangs is to make the youth feel a sense of belonging. A minister's congregation legitimizes him or her. Voters legitimize politicians. Wives legitimize husbands. Husbands legitimize wives. And for family members the family legitimizes. If you identify mainly as a "brother," (in the black male club) then like-minded men of African descent may legitimize you, but if you don't, or if other black men are not available to you, then you will need to be included by and embraced by significant others whose authority and influence you respect.

Validation: The Power of Feeling That Others Share Your Views and Values

Tim walked up to the bar where his friends had gathered for drinks and threw his coat on top of the counter.

"Hey, you guys. I just had several white folks pass by me, including a police car, casting suspicious looks in my direction. So what did black folks do evil in the news this evening?" His sarcasm continued with a smirk, "So, did we create a news event, or was I just getting the usual black man's treatment?"

It is important to know that others think like us. We come to count on our friends sharing our view of the world, providing us with "sanity checks," a frame of reference, and a necessary personal sounding board. When we stand on the corner to listen to other men's stories, trials, and tribulations—or nod approvingly to both the music and lyrics of our favorite rap, soul, jazz, or blues song—it confirms for us that we are not alone. We are not, as a member of my support group puts it, *"ter-*

minally unique" in the way we experience and view life. The beauty of feeling that you belong to a group is that you know you will share common experiences and outlooks.

Without others to verify reality, people become uncertain of themselves, even confused and disoriented about what is right or wrong. This is no less true for black men than for any other group of people.

Respect: The Power of Feeling That You Are Being Treated as a Person of Value and Worth

I met Tom at a diversity-training seminar that I was conducting for a major company. During the lunch break Tom came over to my table and asked if I had a few moments to talk. He knew I had to prepare for the afternoon session, but he rarely had the "chance" (read "safe place") to share some of his real work experiences with anyone other than his wife. I was a professional, an African American, a brother who seemed to know about the challenges of black men in the corporate world, and he knew that I could probably give him professional advice on how to handle a frequent occurrence. He thought he could count on me to understand who he was.

In his work group Tom repeatedly offered his opinion and views on solving conflicts, team building, and developing plans to increase efficiency and productivity. However, he always felt that his contributions were not taken seriously. One day his friend, a white coworker, rephrased the same suggestions Tom had made and pointed to Tom as the originator of the idea. But his white manager credited his white friend with the good idea. Tom felt humiliated and angry. He would be the first to say that being respected is a vital part of feeling like somebody. That's what Aretha Franklin's singing R-E-S-P-E-C-T was about to him as a man, despite what it meant to her as a woman.

The popularity of the saying "don't 'diss' me"—short for "don't show disrespect for me" among many African Americans—also speaks to the rules surrounding the violation of interpersonal boundaries and

"my space." "Dissing" is linked with the behavior of urban youth and the street codes they follow, but as easy as it is to identify this value with the younger generation, it also represents the macho bravado attitude at all ages. Those of us who are older also expect and demand respect from those we encounter.

Our family, friends, and coworkers should know, moreover, that we want to be respected according to the standards we set, each of us, individually. Sometimes our "boys" (friends) define our standards for respect, and sometimes we set standards driven by our unique needs. A black male who needs reassurance that he is important, for example, may feel respected only if his plans for the evening are followed without question. Another's desire for loved ones to make a fuss over him and indulge him might come from his own sense of inadequacy, or a lack of enough indulgence or sufficient recognition from his friends.

If we are feeling disrespected when we leave one location, such as work, and enter another location, such as home, only to feel disrespected there, then the stage is set for getting upset and perhaps acting out. Respect is part of the nuclear core of our identity, and when that core is tampered with our entire set of protective instincts is activated.

"My clean boots are an extension of who I am," explained Jam, an articulate sixteen-year-old. "Anyone step on my boots, they're stepping on me, and I'm going to step on them." Assaulting someone for stepping on your shoes sounds crazy, even when the thinking behind it is understood. But when it comes to black men, respect is often the nuclear core of personality.

Rappers aren't the only black men who talk about the hazards of getting "stepped on," "trounced," "kicked to the curb," or "kicked in the ass." These are only a few everyday black idioms that represent disrespect and symbolize being down in the gutter in defeat. Being defeated, "whipped," means you can't hold your own under attack. You are vulnerable, and therefore weak. This is as much the case when you are verbally abused as when you are physically attacked. Survival and respect are heavily linked.

Respect implies mutual understanding and reciprocity among black men, based on an implicit consensus tied to our sense of right and wrong,

as well as of social justice. But, for the individual, that standard frequently evolves from a lonely and complex experience of consensus building with other men of African descent trying to make sense out of life.

People who want to connect to us do well to realize that we are forever alert to the many ways we are disrespected, and we feel compelled to demonstrate our ability to fend them off. If we don't, we see ourselves as persons without dignity, people who have no pride. And that is an identity we cannot accept without losing self-esteem.

Dignity: The Power of Feeling That You Are a Person of Value and Worth

"Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud," James Brown shouted out on behalf of generations of black men. He knew that a brother defines pride for himself. For black men, the most important ingredient in the definition of pride is the individual person's point of view.

Consider Wheels' story. He set up a makeshift curbside auto detail business in front of his apartment house on a Brooklyn street. It was one of his many hustles to make some extra change, to pay bills, and to indulge his taste in clothes and women. Everyone in the neighborhood knew that if you wanted your car to look nice you let Wheels work on it. Wheels also had to establish his own standards to preserve his dignity and reputation. You knew he would treat your car no differently than he would treat his own.

When Wheels purchased a new car, he expected all of the brothers in the 'hood to recognize his new car and heap praise on his selection. When he ordered many custom features he knew the car salesman couldn't appreciate what it meant to his reputation. With the special interior upholstery and stereo system, he had one of the "baddest" four wheelss in the neighborhood. When his car was finely detailed and polished to perfection by his secret technique, Wheels marveled at how everything else came together. He was gratified that everyone stared at the car's magnificence, and Wheels knew his reputation was going to remain intact and his opinion would still be valued. If you wanted to

know about taking care of cars, Wheels was the man. But there was no questioning his work, for to do so would bring his honor into question.

You can't have dignity without self-respect. Likewise you can't gain dignity unless you have all the other elements working in concert to support pride in yourself. Wheels earned his dignity through his car. The personal achievement brought him the honor he associated with manhood. This is important to understand, because it helps explain the lengths to which someone like Wheels will go to preserve his dignity, even though everyone may not share his standards.

Pride is personal. Anyone working with or helping black men needs to understand that the idea of pride is not broad and inclusive. What defines pride for one person may be sorely inadequate for another, or out of reach for yet another. No one knows what makes a black man proud unless they ask.

Identity: The Power of Feeling Comfortable with the Way You Are and with Who You Are

Paradoxically, black men persist in trying to set standards for pride among themselves. Our relationship with women is a good example. "Where's your pride, brother?" was the challenge tossed at a member of my support group by the other men in the group when he admitted losing an argument with his wife. This was a challenge I have heard numerous times.

"Am I who *we* are?" That's a question some black men frequently find themselves asking defensively.

Dejo, for example, told me how he could lie wrapped in the darkness of his unlit bedroom, staring into the black hole of the night. Reflecting at first on his activities of the day—his accomplishments, uncompleted tasks—his thoughts drifted into evaluating his entire life. He thought about how little people really knew him. On the other hand, he also thought about how little he let people get to know him. It was not easy being a black man, he thought. A misstep and you could fall off the precipice into the abyss of presumptions about all black men.

I can understand Dejo's problem. Racial identity came hard for him, but it has rarely been easy for any black man. Think about the many ways we labeled ourselves over generations: colored, Negro, black, Afro-American, African American, people of color, biracial, people of African descent. These various labels reflect just how elusive our identity has always been. Some of us who are obviously of African descent quickly de-identify from America's racial history, saying, I'm Bajan, Jamaican, Trinidadian, Puerto Rican, or Dominican. All this shifting could lead anyone to ask, *Will the real "we" please stand up?*

Men like Dejo lie awake at night trying to figure it out. You know they have given up—and given in to invisibility—when they say, "Let's not talk about my identity as a black man, African American man, or man of African descent."

The problem with de-identifying is that it opens the door to greater ambivalence, a breeding ground for the invisibility syndrome. Without a positive sense of racial identity, it is hard to get a permanent foothold in the struggle for visibility.

In contrast to Dejo's view, most black men find that bonding with each other in various types of friendship networks strengthens self-esteem and confirms identity in the midst of invisibility. For the majority of us, a sense of brotherhood creates a safety net. It enables survival. It emphasizes looking out for one's self at the same time that it offers a significant number of opportunities for developing personal power within the ethnic group.

As an antidote to invisibility on the job or in our family relationships, brotherhood offers numerous protective environments and alternative places to be ourselves. That's a good thing, but it also takes its toll because empowered manhood is our ultimate goal. At its best, brotherhood is an avenue to manhood, not a substitute for it. When a "brother" knows he can achieve any goal he chooses, in any context he chooses, without giving into the worst effects of invisibility, he is on his way to real manhood. Manhood is implicit in the spiritual resolve to make commitments, and the sense of responsibility and accountability to keep them. When our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors serve the interests of our family, friends, and community—not only our self-

interests—we have achieved what I mean by manhood. In other words, our manhood must be defined and evaluated by how well our relationships, family, friends, and community prosper as we prosper. To achieve this, our manhood identity must have at its core consensus, stability, and consistency in our commitment to beliefs, values, and behaviors, as well as our responsibility for their realization. Our manhood, therefore, must be greater in vision and practices than our brotherhood. Manhood thrives on personal power, it is not just a measure of it, but, like brotherhood, it turns on self-acceptance.

Self-acceptance came hard for Dejo. He wondered if it was right or wrong to identify with other black men. My answer was that it was not a matter of right or wrong but more a matter of how he wanted to conduct his life. The point was to understand his goals and then to be honest about the results.

He wanted to be somebody and to feel like a person of worth just like everyone else. If his efforts to achieve that fundamental identity were blocked down one path by invisibility, it was only natural to seek it down another through brotherhood. At the same time, Dejo was right to pause when he reflected on the mindless thinking and selfish "get over" behavior he associated with black brotherhood.

One time I asked Craig, a small-time neighborhood drug dealer, why he sold this stuff to the young people on the block.

"Look, brother, if I can't deal here I'll go deal in another neighborhood, but at greater risk," he replied. "If you don't understand what I have to do you won't understand why."

Both Craig and Dejo were trapped by the paradox of brotherhood, one abusing and the other doubting his identity as a black man. The idea that brotherhood itself could be problematic for black men struggling with invisibility reminded me of a lesson I learned as a child at the beach. Back in those days, I loved to build structures in the sand. Waves coming in and going out would flow around, through, and over my sculpted canals, mountains, castles, and barriers. I was fascinated to see how water from a wave followed my makeshift paths but also overran those furrows that were too shallow, creating uncharted outlets in the water's ebb and flow and destroying those I thought I had carefully created.

Like water running free, we either navigate the predetermined course or make our own way. Where we leave our mark, others will follow. If we make the mark too shallow, or make no mark at all, we will be swept away, leaving nothing in our place but dismembered dreams. Unfortunately, we often let ourselves get faked out by the paradox of brotherhood.

On one hand brotherhood is powerful, offering a substantive identity through which to shape our attitudes, opinions, and behavior on the road to empowered manhood. Brotherhood tells us how to relate to others, how to live our lives, and what to do differently than we might do otherwise because we are black and we are men.

On the other hand, brotherhood, in and of itself, won't necessarily block the invisibility syndrome or turn us into responsible men. Why? I believe it is because the messages, images, and patterns ingrained in our minds about the way to be authentic black men—what I call the brotherhood rules—are as likely to be infected by invisibility as stereotypes are. Opinions about how to be black men with respect among other black men—opinions that we are programmed to trust—may not be essential to our survival, but rather connected to some other agenda.

What is the self-identity of African American men who call each other "brother"? What social codes or rules merely mask a sense of invisibility and feed into the syndrome, and which actually contribute to our personal power? These are not easy questions to answer without intimate knowledge of the social world of black men.