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Resilience, the Family and Social Activism

I had the opportunity to become acquainted with the term resilience and at least two of its meanings. Having graduated in mechanical engineering, I studied the physical properties of materials and learned that resilience had to do with the capacity of matter to assume its original form after undergoing physical alteration. I became aware, however, of the application of this term in the social area and must confess that, though I often disagree with the misuse of technical terms from the physical sciences when applied to the humanities, it seems as if the concept of resilience translates well. In short, I consider human resilience to mean the capacity of the individual to withstand the hard blows of everyday life without, however, losing sight of the possibility of overcoming these obstacles and imagining better days ahead.

To precisely identify the factors that contribute to this quality of resilience in individuals and communities would be difficult, inasmuch as these factors are very subjective. However, I believe that the Wilson Center initiative to discuss this topic on the basis of the experience with resilience in leaders, such as myself, who are engaged in social movements, can indeed illuminate truths as to the manner by which individuals and communities develop resilience strategies when facing social challenges.

Reflecting upon the occasions in my life when my own resilience was put to the test, I observed that to show my resilience it was important that I first develop a "culture or tradition of achievement," or to have lived among achievers whose successes inspired me. In this regard I must emphasize the essential role played by my family who made me believe in my capacity to overcome adverse circumstances. I made a habit of listening attentively to the stories my mother and father told about their pasts and came to the understanding that, despite the typical difficulties that blacks in Brazil face, my parents always gave me a sense of success, to the point of my attributing a divine quality to a successful life experience. In fact, these accounts of successful experiences were drawn upon for a very practical reason: my mother's family was very large (10 siblings) and

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poor. They shared a single small dwelling and had very little schooling. My father also had little education and never inherited any wealth. Both were able, however, to achieve something extraordinary for people of their time and station: they had their own home, for example, and were able to put their four children in good schools and have all of them graduate from the best institutions of higher learning in our state. From this background, I see myself as part of a team born to win. My self-esteem was instilled on the basis of the real experience of family successes which taught me to believe, at a very young age, that everything is possible in terms of what society has to offer.

Confronting the world outside of my family obviously forced me to ponder much having to do with this capacity to change the world as it is. At this point, though, I had already taken stock of a "history of achievement" that shielded me from the adversities of Brazil's extraordinarily racist and inequitable social reality. I had always stood as an exception within the educational institutions where I studied. After all, how many blacks were able to complete a mechanical engineering degree in my state? This social isolation – very common among blacks in Brazil who have achieved a certain social standing – causes many grave psychological and physical difficulties for individuals such as myself. The daily experience of explicit and implicit prejudice and its manifestations leaves these individuals in a state of extreme psychological vulnerability. The mere challenge to such moral injury, when not rebutted with derision, is looked upon as hyperbole or unwarranted thanks to the survival of the myth of racial democracy which credited Brazilian slavery as the most innocuous of all.   This farce was obviously conceived based on the idea of the "plantation house" of the master of yore, whose descendents, to divest themselves of the inhuman legacy of slavery, disingenuously sugarcoated the history of massacre perpetrated against the black population of Brazil.

Situations in which blacks become targets of special vigilance in shopping centers, restaurants and on streets are routine in Brazil. To this offense I would add a general disregard for the intellectual potential of Brazilian blacks. In Bahia, for instance, a state with a significant number of blacks and where black culture is prominent, a professor of medicine at the state's most prestigious university declared in no uncertain terms that the people of Bahia posses relatively low "IQ's" and that one of the principal Afro-Bahian musical instruments, the berimbau, "is an instrument appropriate for individuals with few neurons, as it has but one chord and does not demand much cerebral acumen to create musical sound." Yes, James Watson has disciples in Brazil.

And this is the typical situation faced by blacks in our country: a life that gravitates between discrimination in its more explicit forms and prejudices that silently impede their social and economic advancement.

In 1992, after recognizing this condition of prejudice and adversity, I joined a group of young blacks who essentially sought to contribute to the effort to increase the number of black students at universities. Along the way, we realized that we were in a position to promote many more changes. We then established Brazil's first college-examination preparatory course for blacks and formed the Steve Biko Cultural Institute – one of the most important organizations of the country's black movement –– after the South-African leader who fought against apartheid and stands as a great example of resilience. My experience in this organization has taught me to put into action the words of Steve Biko himself: *"We are on our own."* We have undergone and are still living through a very difficult phase in which resources are in chronic short supply. Our economic viability, however, has never been critical to putting together and implementing our projects. Any practical analysis involving objective financial criteria would doom a good portion of these projects before the start. However, if the concept of resilience has anything to do with a belief in better days ahead, certainly this belief will be the foundation of our activities in the Steve Biko Cultural Institute. The belief in the justice of our cause has brought us heretofore unimagined results. An example of the Institute's achievements is a program promoting interest in the sciences and technology among black youth called Oguntec. To my surprise, this initiative was resisted even by my own colleagues on the Institute's board who, at the time, were skeptical of yet another program of this kind given the difficulty of maintaining already existing underfinanced and understaffed programs.

However, my vision of the program's future and the urgent need for an initiative of this nature[2] • which could stimulate the interest of black youngsters in the sciences and technology • far exceeded the pessimism engendered by a pragmatic accounting of scarce funds. In 2002, I summoned the powers of the divinity (or "orixá) Ogum that gave the program its name and resolved to open paths (the opening of paths being a power linked to this orixá who, according to some African religions, is associated with technological

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[2] In Brazil, according to Exame Nacional de Cursos de 2003, students who declare themselves "white" hold 78.35% of engineering degrees from programs covered by the survey. Those registering as "black" hold 2.12% of the degrees and, according to the same survey, mestizos (mixed race or mulatto) hold 14.45% (Source: MEC/INEP/DEAES - ENC/2003).

progress). I thus formed the program's first class along with a group of volunteer teachers, and staffed the administration with two of the Institute's former students about to receive education degrees from their respective universities.   Among the main difficulties we faced at the start of the program I might mention: a lack of resources, even of funds for the teachers' transportation which caused us to lose staff; also, students' lack of funds for both transportation and meals, resulting in a substantial drop-out problem during the first year.

Besides these difficulties, I had to balance the task of managing the program with the demands of my professional life elsewhere, a situation that put great strain on the administration of the program. I thus found myself in a complicated situation: I knew that I had brought to fruition an exciting initiative, but its precariousness made it difficult for people to place much faith in its future. One year after the program's founding, however, I was surprised by the news that a U.S. consular officer in Brazil had expressed interest in a project to train 100 black engineers in the hope of stimulating Salvador's socioeconomic development. This marriage of ideas seemed unbelievable at the time given the circumstances in which it occurred. Actually, though, here we had an individual, with consular experience in Brazil, who realized that racism lay at the core of inequality, and whose experience with affirmative action programs led him to believe that investment in policies of this sort, those that targeted areas such as engineering that yield considerable social impact, could promote significant changes in the socioeconomic condition of Brazil's black citizens, especially in Salvador.

Together with the U.S. consular officer, we invited important individuals and institutions to be partners in support of our initiative, including an important state university and a large multinational engineering company. In our first meeting with these potential supporters, we gave a presentation outlining proposals for the program; this did not, however, engender the desired response, and we were unable to establish a partnership that would lend financial support. In pursuit of a second opportunity, we arrived in Rio de Janeiro with a delegation composed of representatives from the university and from a [third-sector] consulting firm. Our Rio proposal was presented to a different multinational company with business in the oil sector. The company was U.S.-owned with its main operations in Brazil and, though it probably adhered to a policy of racial diversity at its U.S. headquarters, its business in Brazil was carried out according to the rule of the invisibility of racial inequality. Indeed, among the firm's

officers, judging at least on the basis of those present at our meeting, not a single black executive was to be found. Again, our presentation of the program did not generate any interest in these potential contributors. The myth of racial democracy, so beneficial to the Brazilian white business class, is very difficult for their minds to dispel.

I can also remember a meeting, held some hours before the one with the aforementioned company, in which some members of our delegation were very emphatic in denying the likelihood of the support we were seeking. Some suggested changes and presentation of a different proposal, one that would put aside our request for support of the Oguntec program. Indeed, I observed that for the most part, the consular officer and I were the only ones who believed in the proposal. Still, I stuck to the original proposal and, as mentioned earlier, we had no luck. On the other hand, this opportunity strengthened partnerships within the delegation such that later one of its members became a member of a large American foundation. In 2005, this foundation through the assistance of this member, began supporting the Oguntec program and other Steve Biko Cultural Institute initiatives. In 2007, our proposal caught the attention of yet another American foundation which now supports the Oguntec program.

This commitment to maintaining the Oguntec program yielded tremendous benefits for those involved and for me personally. I was considered for a Master's Degree scholarship sponsored by the Ford Foundation and enrolled in the Master of Education, Philosophy and History of Sciences degree program at the Federal University of Bahia, where the topic of my dissertation was my experiences with the Oguntec program. More recently, I was a candidate for an Ashoka Foundation grant to develop yet another Oguntec program. I was also hired as a consultant to the Secretary of Education of the State of Bahia. The crowning achievement of our program was winning the Young Scientist Prize from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, an entity which considers proposals for combating inequality. The prize is one of the most prestigious acknowledgements of the successful promotion of the sciences in all of Latin America.

In addition to all of these achievements, I must not fail to mention the transformations in the lives of those young people who pass their college entrance exams thanks to the program, and who later enroll in university science and technology programs that prepare them to end the cycle of poverty in which their families are

caught. Equally important is the opportunity represented by Oguntec to shape public policies so they are more inclusive of black youth in the sciences and technology.

The apparent difficulty of relying upon domestic sources of funding for affirmative action programs represents one of many obstacles in the path of militants within the black movement such as myself. The social cost is great, and the resilience that is part and parcel of my social dealings is constantly put to the test. As I have said, however, I developed the ability to surmount disappointment and frustration chiefly thanks to my family. This advantage is becoming increasingly less common given the great number of families that are dysfunctional (especially poor black families), systematically victimized by alcohol and drugs, and who do not offer children a nurturing example in a context of social achievement – an ingredient necessary for the development of resilience needed to face social challenges and nurture hope for a better future.