

# Venus

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PERSPECTIVES

## PHILL WILSON: PAVING THE WAY!

Douglas E. Jones

**F**rom his vantage point in the Black community, the Black gay community, the Black gay community living with AIDS, Phill Wilson offers reflections on a multitude of issues. Wilson is eloquent, his diplomacy accommodating without being evasive. This January, under the directorship of Phill Wilson as Grand Marshall, the King parade will commence its annual celebration. It is not significant that Mr. Wilson is gay. There have been other openly gay Grand Marshalls of the King parade: Barney Frank, the Congressman, Peri Jude Radevic, and Ivy Young, both of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, to name three. But, is it significant that the King Center choose Mr. Wilson as Grand Marshall because of the fact that he is an openly gay, African-American man? Venus Magazine asked that question and many others in our conversation with Wilson, the Policy Director of AIDS Project Los Angeles and the founder of the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum (BGLLF).

**Venus Magazine:** Given the image of the King Center as a conservative African-American institution, is it historically significant that you, an African-American gay man living with AIDS, are going to be the Grand Marshall for this year's parade?

**Phill Wilson:** Well, I really don't know if it's significant, that's a question you would have to ask them [the King Center]. Certainly, I'm not the first gay person to be a grand marshall I know of at least two or three openly gay or lesbian people who have been Grand Marshall of the parade. I believe this will be the first time that they've had a Black gay man as the Grand Marshall, and probably the first time that they've had a person with AIDS. I'm not in Atlanta, so I can't speak to the King Center's reputation there, but certainly my impression of the King Center would not be to characterize them as being a conservative Black institution. As a matter of fact, the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership



Forum, which is the national Black gay and lesbian organization that I founded, has had a very strong relationship with the King Center since its inception. We held a summit on homophobia in the Black community as early as 1988 which was hosted by the King Center and convened by Martin Luther King III.

**VM:** Considering the King Center's position in terms of leadership on the issue, how does that reflect back to the overriding sentiment of homophobia within the Black community?

**PW:** Although, to my knowledge, Dr. King didn't explicitly address the issues surrounding gay and lesbian people in any of his writings, certainly he addressed the issues implicitly in his writings and his speeches. Mrs. King, on a number of occasions most recently at the National Skills Building Conference held in Atlanta during November has explicitly spoken about the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the civil rights struggle. She also stated that she believes, were her husband alive today, that he would have included gays and lesbians in any civil rights works that he was a part of. Mrs. King also spoke out strongly during the military activity, stating that gays and lesbians should not be arbitrarily dismissed simply on the basis of sexual orientation.

**VM:** So, within the Black community, are we finally moving to grappling with the issues of sexuality and homophobia?

**PW:** Absolutely. I think that the issue around sexual minority and sexual diversity is one with which the Black community is struggling. Certainly we have our own version of the religious, radical right, if you will. But, I think that the issue for Black folks is rooted more in fundamental strategies around survival and although I don't agree that we have to

make some of the choices that others seem to believe we have to make, I do believe that what motivates Black people, Black leaders in particular, to make some of the choices that can be perceived as homophobic, are really not about homosexuality or positions about gay and lesbian people, but more rooted in fears and issues about survival.

**VM:** Meaning that we are coming to a prioritization about embracing the struggle as Black folks versus Black gay folks.

**PW:** Right. Nevertheless, as Black gay men and lesbians, I think we have an obligation to challenge those issues and positions. From my point of view, to the extent that homophobia exists in the Black community, and clearly it does, it partially exists because not enough of us have been willing to be openly gay and lesbian in the context of our communities and the work of our communities.

**VM:** You have often talked about the need for us to create that space in which to come home; the space in which to be able to simultaneously interact with society on the cultural level and with our families on issues of sexuality.

**PW:** Exactly. The truth of the matter is our communities need us. They need us now more than ever and they need our talent and our skills. And the only way for us to deal with that particularly considering the rising Black nationalist movement which sometimes perceives us as a threat is, quite frankly, to make sure that we hold on to our legacy and our birthright. No one has a right to take our Blackness away from us. It is not an acceptable paradigm to say that one needs to choose between one's sexual orientation and one's race. It is an untenable paradigm to put one in. We need to reject that and say, 'No we are not going to make that choice and we are not going to give up our communities, our families, our churches, and our homes.'

**VM:** How do we straddle that fence? How do we claim ourselves?

**PW:** First of all I don't think that there's a fence that needs to be straddled. I think it's a matter of claiming all of who we are. Do you ever ask a Black woman, 'Well are you a woman or are you Black?' It is not a question that you ask. Do you ever ask a child, 'Well are you a child or are you Black?' Or if you're left-handed or tall, 'Are you lefthanded or Black?' etc. You don't ask those questions. Now, granted, in some of those situations there are not enough socio-political implications connected to those identities, so the parallel is not complete. But, nevertheless, at the end of the day any contribution

that I or we can make to a community that desperately needs our contribution is enhanced when we (a) claim all of who we are and (b) don't have to invest time and energy in hiding who we are. So, the Black community, in the final analysis, benefits by Black gays and lesbians being able to be who they are within our community. I hope that that is, in fact, a significant part of the message in my being selected the Grand Marshall in this year's celebration because that certainly has been the way I have lived my life. I have attempted to integrate the all of my life into the all of who I am and what I do whether or not the specific venue I am working in is a "Black" venue or a "gay" venue or its an "AIDS" venue, I bring my vision of the world, which is the vision of a Black gay man living with AIDS, to those venues.

**VM:** People of color, be they Black or Latino, constitute a disproportionate number of those whom are affected by HIV and AIDS, but, on the reverse side, we represent such a small percentage of those who are in volunteer and educational capacities. Are we ignoring ourselves?

**PW:** I think that there is still a tremendous amount of denial within the Black community about AIDS. But, in addition to that, to be completely honest, being able to volunteer in any capacity is a luxury. It means that you have time in your life after you have managed to survive and for far too many Black folks that's just not true. You know after we have exhausted all our human resources, we've still not reached the point where there is any surety that we'll survive. There's nothing left to volunteer. So, I think that one of the significant factors that are in place which impacts the disproportionately low numbers of African-Americans who are involved in the work or volunteering to fight AIDS is directly related to what a tremendous effort it takes for Black people to survive.

**VM:** Evidence of the racial and economic implications of AIDS. We should be concerned, then, about the recent Republican sweep?

**PW:** Absolutely we should. For Black folk and for Black gay folk, it's a disaster. It is apocalyptic. The people who now control the Congress are not concerned about the needs of poor people or historically disenfranchised people, of people who they define as being fringe people. We're not on the radar screen in a positive manner, so we better be concerned about the make-up of Congress.

**VM:** As Black gay leadership, as Black leadership, what should be some of our strategies? Where should our minds be focused?

**PW:** I think there are certainly short term and long term strategies that we need to engage in. One of the things that we need to do that is both short term and long term is to educate our communities that they have the responsibility and the power to make a difference. And they have that power because of the right to minimally vote in this country, without regard to race or class and that vote can be a very powerful thing. One of the reasons that we had the type of election results that we had this year was not so much because people voted overwhelmingly for a regressive government, but that people who had something to lose did not vote. Black people did not vote. Gay people did not vote. Poor people did not vote. Single mothers did not vote. All of the people who are targeted by this contract on America I call it a contract "on" America because I think it is a contract "on" America and not a contract "with" America, it's a contract about destroying America. All of those people who are particularly vulnerable to that contract, too many of them, stayed home. And that's the way oppression works. The only thing that is necessary for evil to prevail is for people of goodwill and good conscience to do nothing.

**VM:** So that it all comes back to the issue of ownership and responsibility.

**PW:** Absolutely.

**VM:** You've mentioned numerous times that you're a little surprised when you hear yourself being referred to as a leader. Do you still feel that way?

**PW:** Well, at this point in my life, I certainly accept that mantle. It's not a mantle that I choose or would chose, but I accept it and the responsibilities that go along with it. If the world was of my choosing we would not need titles like "leader," per se, because so many of us would be doing the things that we need to do to make our lives better. I'm much more comfortable with thinking of myself as a teacher, or possibly, a facilitator or motivator, because I think that at the end of the day what I try to do is live my life with honor and integrity and help other people understand how important it is to live their lives with honor and integrity and how possible it is to do that.

**VM:** Given the state of the Black gay movement today, are we living our lives with integrity and dignity?

**PW:** I think alot of us, the vast majority of us, are in fact, living our lives with a tremendous amount of courage, integrity and dignity; more of us than not. I think that many of us are living our lives with a tremendous amount of fear and those two things are not mutually exclusive by any stretch of the imagination.

**VM:** In terms of the larger gay movement, given that courage and that fear, is there not recognition that our needs, as Black lesbian and gay folks are, perhaps, intrinsically different from the larger gay movement?

**PW:** I don't know if our needs are intrinsically different from the larger gay movement or the larger Black movement, for that matter. I think that certainly, as Black lesbians and gay men, we have some needs that are unique because of the unique position that we hold in this apex of identity. But, I think that at the end of the day when I have conversations with my straight Black brother about his wishes about life, his dreams, and his aspirations or have discussion with any number of my White gay or lesbian friends, what I discover is that our dreams and our aspirations are very, very similar. I discover that each of us have unique barriers in front of us in the attainment of those dreams and aspirations, but the dreams and aspirations are our common ground. Dreams and aspirations are our common ground for most of us.

**VM:** Can those barriers be unilateral in terms of race and group? Can there exist barriers for Black lesbian and gay men which don't exist for Black heterosexual men and women?

**PW:** Certainly. And those things are mostly rooted in the combination of oppression that we face and the historical perspective of where community is. What I mean by that is to deal with racism is one thing or to deal with homophobia is one thing, but to deal with racism, homophobia, and, if you're a lesbian, sexism, all at the same is an entirely different matter. You're not really afforded the opportunity to deal with these things in a serial manner, where you have the one, then the next, and then the third. You're forced to deal with things in parallels, you have to juggle them all at the same time and that does increase the burden. The second problem is really a matter of historical manifestation and that is that the Black lesbian and gay community has not developed the kind of infrastructure that the larger Black community has developed or that the larger gay and lesbian community has developed. That's one of the things that the Black gays and lesbians have to make a commitment to do. We have to build an autonomous Black gay and lesbian infrastructure or community of institutions that are by, about and for us because it is those institutions that then come to the table to negotiate with institutions created by other communities to create the type of collaborative efforts that are going to be necessary for our survival.

**VM:** Again, back to the need to come home, back to embracing who we are and not being in the closet.

VM: It goes back to what we sacrifice by not being visible, by not claiming ourselves.

PW: Exactly. And it is certainly possible that my experience is unique, but I think not. I certainly don't think that I've made any sacrifices by being visible. I don't think that being clear about who I am has ever affected me in a negative way. It has only affected me in a positive way.

VM: How would you approach that brother or sister who is a school teacher? Who simply cannot afford to be visible?

PW: I am not one of those people who subscribes to some principle that every single person has to come out. That's not what I'm fighting for; what I'm fighting for is for everyone to have that choice to come out.

What I would say to that person is, quite frankly well, Audre Lorde said it, and I certainly don't venture to be anywhere near as smart, articulate or as gifted as Audre Lorde was, but when Audre Lorde said in *Litany for Survival*, 'When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcome. But when we are silent we are still afraid.' The point is that we stay in the closet or invisible because we are afraid and what we discover is that even when we're invisible we're still afraid, so we might as well be visible because the invisibility does not remove the fear. The invisibility will not protect us in anyway in terms of job security or freedom from rejection because even when we are invisible we are vulnerable to those things. Finally, if we're going to do a reality check, most people know anyway. I can't tell you the endless number of times when I've had Black gay men or lesbians finally come out to their parents, family or friends and the response has been, 'What are you talking about, we knew this all along.' That's the most common response that happens. You know you're fortyfive years old and you've had a male roommate for twenty years. I mean give me a break.

VM: There seems to be a lot of identification of this 'lost' generation in the African-American community. A lot of attention is focused on one out of every four Black men does this, as opposed to three out of every four Black men are doing this. Is there a deficit of youth leadership in the African-American community and in the African-American gay community?

PW: Is there a deficit? Is there a shortage of potential?

VM: Yes.

PW: Absolutely not. There's a myth of scarcity that we have to fight against. There's no shortage of potential and there's no shortage of opportunities. There is certainly a shortage of folks who have discovered how to access the opportunities that are there and how to overcome the barriers that are before us, but there certainly is not a deficit of talent, intelligence or potential.

VM: How do we widen the access to those opportunities? More skills building conferences? More grass roots efforts to reach a broader range of people?

PW: I have to be honest and say that I have no idea how to do that. I certainly don't believe that I've found the magic to that and I haven't spoken to anyone who has engendered in me the confidence to say that they've found the answer. But, what I do know is that any and all of us who are interested in this work need to commit to trying to finance it. Quite frankly, it just may mean getting to a critical mass of folks who've decided that I'm Black, I'm gay or lesbian and, quite frankly, I deserve all that this world has to offer and I deserve to be able to live my life to its fullest potential. What will happen once we reach a critical mass of us who truly believe that, that example, I think, will cause a revolution.

VM: As a person living with HIV disease, what have been some of your sustaining forces?

PW: Some of my major sustaining forces have been understanding the power and the potential of our people and an understanding that we will get there wherever that 'there' of liberation is. We're going to get there I don't have a doubt in my mind. Because of my particular illness, I'm under no delusions that it's going in a timeframe that's convenient to me, but we're going to get there. And I will continue to try to do whatever I can do, with my limited skill set, to move that process as far and as fast as I possibly can.

VM: How is your health?

PW: My health is fine, actually. I'm just hanging in there.

VM: Good. We thank you much for the interview and for your example.

*Douglas E. Jones is a novelist from Brooklyn, N.Y. and news editor for this magazine.*