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Society

Three Paths

In turbulent times, educators need amazing mentors

By Andrew Parker, '08 BA, '14 BEd

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Two-time grad and Golden Bears basketball veteran Andrew Parker [spoke at a rally](#) for Black and Indigenous rights in Edmonton in June. A teacher, Parker was proud to see many of his students and former students there. It got him thinking about mentorship, and he knew it was time to take action. He and

fellow teacher Sarah Adomako-Ansah, '13 BEd, [formed the Black Teachers' Association of Alberta](#) to improve representation, communication, inclusion and networking for Black teachers. At the same time as he was striving to be a mentor, he knew he had to seek mentorship, too. We asked him to tell us about it.

Seventy years old.

It was about an hour into the conversation before my mentor, and my elder, told me his exact age.

You couldn't tell by looking at his body. My God. In the heat of June, he walked with his shirt off in his own home. Ripped like a seasoned athlete. He could easily have passed for 55. But still. There he stood. My mentor, 70 years old, a strong Black man.

First of all (I secretly ask myself), how do I make sure that I can look that way at 70 years old? I guess he has that answer. I guess he has many answers. He is Mr. E. Patrick Powell and I am there to listen to his answers.

I've never been to his home before. We've mostly met at district gatherings. But the urgency of our conversation motivated me to be there. To break bread with him.

At his home, I greet him and I give him a pound handshake as is custom in our culture. I commend him on his physique. We share a laugh. And then we get right to business.

"So ... big brother, what was it like being 'the' Black teacher in your generation?" I ask.

He thinks for a second, and then motions me to his garden in his backyard. He'd been digging there before I called him, so as we continue our talk, we dig up his weeds.

"Black jokes," he answers, "lots of Black jokes." I figure he'll retell me stories similar to my United States elders' experiences as Black men. But his wisdom is different. He wants to know if I can listen as well as I try to speak.

We talk about generations. Decades. Years. And months. Trying collectively to convey and understand ourselves. As Black teachers in Canada.

"Did you go through this?" he asks. Me too.

"Did that situation get settled?" he asks. Me too.

"Who was there to help?" he asks. Me too.

"Did you think about being a Black teacher all the time?" he asks. Me too.

Two hours of talk, two generations we walk. Thirty-three years separate our encounters on Earth as Black men (and educators). Yet our story is similar. Sadly, strangely, familiar and similar.

Plans, goals, dreams, visions, words, pain, love, disappointment and understanding. We talk, just two Black men. In another lifetime we could have been father and son. But for today we are both proactive Black educators. Wise beyond both of our years. I guess you could call us living Black historians.

Had I chosen a different profession, our paths would seldom cross. If an illness had befallen him a few years prior, I never would have received this wisdom. But we were here, together. Black brothers.

In the Black community, as a younger member, you have three paths.

Path 1: Listen to your elders (as hard as it may seem due to generational differences), and most likely win.

Path 2: Don't listen to them, work hard, try your own way, and potentially win (a huge gamble).

Path 3: Don't listen, lose horribly, and either ask for help again or learn to resent our teachers that chose to teach us, despite our gravitation to feel that our answers (based on no empirical evidence) were better than theirs.

I remain humble. I need his guidance. What should the curriculum look like? How do we get more teachers in the field? How many more years must we wait? I'm embarking on a journey that he has lived already. I get corrected four times in our conversation. But he is happy to hear my rebuttals. Dare I say, even impressed.

We plan for the future of Black educators in our province. God knows our current situations and past grievances might not get resolved. But maybe my son can live in a world where Black teachers are no longer a novelty. Maybe it will be normal to see our faces in classrooms. For everyone.

Change is at the forefront of our conversation. We talk, laugh, share frustrations and collaborate. Both of us being Jamaican also helps our communication with one another. We can navigate between speaking the King's English and our native patois quite easily. It is the bridge for us. And we use it to meet each other.

Two timelines, one story.

We agree to meet again, but not before talking about fatherhood. It was like I was the Black version of Marty McFly, befriending Doc in the *Back to the Future* movies. Like Doc, Mr. Powell has wisdom and knowledge, but years and structural deterrents prevented him from succeeding in certain tasks that required heart in the cause. Like Marty, I have the heart in the cause, but I fervently seek the wisdom to understand our shared past and help us foresee the future of our people.

We pull the weeds that society had placed in the garden of Black academia. One by one. He pulls first. I follow his lead. Sometimes we throw the tools to the side, and pull these weeds out with our bare hands. Blood, a reasonable cost (figuratively and literally) to purchase a new way of life. For all of us.

Seventy years. If I fail the cause at 37, I pray God gives me 70 years to help the next brother or sister try.

But it's my hope that society will change by then. It was and is Mr. Powell's hope as well.

It's amazing how beautiful a garden looks, when all of the weeds have been pulled. Allowing beautiful flowers, which once were never seen in this environment, to grow.

Mr. Powell and me. Two Black gardeners. Pulling weeds. And planting seeds in the field of education.

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