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What's Under the Hood? (Or, Can a Black Woman Really Lead?)

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Why would anyone choose to lead these days? I mean, our country is struggling mightily, morally, and spiritually depending on who you ask. The aspirational democracy we hoped to become is either living up to its potential or slipping through our fingers depending on whom you ask. Maybe my anxiety about the shape we're in overblown. Maybe it's the expansion of technology, and the fact that the news chases me wherever I go: on my radio, on my television, alerts on my laptop, alerts on my mobile phone. The mess of this world seems inescapable. I feel like Rockwell in that 80's video with that haunting refrain Michael Jackson sang, "I always feel like...somebody's watching me." I know what you're about to say. In an age where there are surveillance cameras on every corner, somebody is always watching me. Feedback, interference, noise...they are all everywhere.

The mess - mess is defined by a widening gap between rich and poor, endless racial disparities in access and opportunity, explosive rates of homelessness and the expansion of the prison industrial complex to name a few - we've created, and that we've watched others create, is everywhere. Why would anyone choose to lead right now? Our country feels like a Type A career mom who's late for work with a screaming toddler in a stroller in tow and the contents of her handbag spilled onto the floor of the elevator, contents that include a not so discreet feminine hygiene product, in front of a male neighbor. America is messy right now. Why would anyone choose to lead anything? And, most importantly, why would I, an unapologetically sane Black woman, choose to lead? Why would I choose to step from behind the shadows of the mythologized Mammy, the fictionalized Cleopatra Jones, the contemptible "Black Welfare Queen", and the Curiously Exceptional, Inadvertently Brown, and Decidedly Asexual Black Superwoman into a well-lit target range to lead anything? I ask myself this question often. The answers always make me weep. The answers make me smile.

The title question, "What's under the hood," was a real question about my leadership accomplishments; a question clothed in resentment, suspicion, and wrapped in racially informed disbelief in Black competence, achievement, and relevance. The questioner wanted a logical explanation outside of me to account for outstanding leadership performance. Was it my education? Nah, that was affirmative action. Was it my upbringing? Nah, Black parents don't have anything substantive to teach their children? Was it my keen understanding of pedagogy and what Black kids need? Nah, who's pulling the strings? For some folks, their privilege will always be intrinsically tied to their own exceptionalism, and my intelligence will always be suspect and tied to an invisible puppet master who will likely not look like me. And, it's even more complicated than that. Because my soft place to land isn't guaranteed to be attached to people who look like me and share my gender. Oppression sometimes divides the oppressed; creates a false sense of scarcity and causes us to reject sisterhood and brotherhood in favor of doomed individualism.

I decided to lead because I came to accept that I was just as good as the alternative, and possibly better. I decided to lead because I understand that injustice and inequality are man-made, and that we can actively choose to create something else. I decided to lead because I had a sneaking suspicion that there were other people who believed in the possibility of Black life enough to also gather themselves up in service, and that I would not have to venture on this journey alone. I decided to lead because history offered me a blueprint for the possibility of liberation, and I understood that even if I don't have all the answers I remain part of the solution. I decided to lead because standing still while life's imperfect music throbbed all around me was more painful than the thought of getting beat down on the dance floor. I lead for the opportunity to mobilize people, resources, and ideas in trying to solve what, at first glance, appear to be intractable social problems. I lead in hopes of providing some relief to someone from the putrid residue of racial injustice, gender inequality, and unequal

opportunity. I lead to bring my often invisible, Black woman perspective to the table for public consumption and consideration from the powers that be. I lead with hope and faith and God, but I do not lead perfectly. I lead to win, and sometimes I do win, and sometimes I lose. But, I lead anyway, so that I can live.

Zora Neale Hurston said, "Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place." She was right. My soul stays woke. My service is love. I love people, and Black folks in particular. I know where their festering wounds are hidden - the open ones and the ones that linger just beneath our Black skin and hearts and minds and threaten to make us go crazy. I know when our smiles are warm and deep, and when we are wearing the masks that grin and lie. I know that many white folks haven't had to deal with Black leadership in any substantive way; not at work, not at school, not at home. I understand that for some people, Black authority is unsettling, and hard to sit with and abide by, and harder still to trust. I understand that for some folks, Black leadership butts up against every myth, lie, and stereotype they ever learned about in school, through the media, from their families. I get that for some Black leadership is a threat to privilege and power and survival.

Black women's leadership is necessary. Necessary for Black people, necessary for Black men, necessary for America. We are the least of these. According to the Center for American Progress, 46% of Black women over the age of 20 suffer from hypertension; Black single women have a median wealth of \$100 while Black women with children have no median wealth; only 21.4% of Black women had a college degree or higher in 2010; only 2% of Black women are represented in STEM careers; and, Black women make only 64¢ on the dollar earned by white men. The list of disparities is extensive. Our leadership is a matter of survival. Our silence potentially deadly.

When the least of these step forth boldly and dauntlessly to illuminate the way for our nation, their courage is a beacon for new possibilities, opportunities, and realities. That, for me, is the essence of this "new" phenomenon: #BlackGirlMagic. When one considers our burden of birth; the imposed and manufactured fragility of our lives; the ways in which everything about America's history, cultural, political structure, faith traditions and economic system conspire to constrict, constrain and dull our blossoming; one can only conclude that Black women meet the dictionary's criteria for magic: "supernatural agency to influence events and produce marvels". To all those Fly Girls mulling over leadership, I say leadership energizes and inspires as much as it challenges and hurts. For every critic, there will be ten cheerleaders. For every obstacle, there will be a source of encouragement. For every reason not to bother, ten reasons to plow ahead will beautifully unfold. Black women lead. Y'all been leading. And, in the words of my mother, with that I say, "Go on, witchabadself!"

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