On Preserving Identity, Debate, and Finding Home

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For the last twenty years, I have participated in high school and collegiate policy academic debate in both regional and national settings. I constantly fight an inherent dualism raging in my mind: the frustrating incremental nature of change concerning participation levels of women and people of color, juxtaposed with my generally positive personal experience within the debate community. Largely, my interaction with the group of people involved in debate creates fond images of compassion, caring, and concern. At the same time, I had resigned myself to the reality of being a token symbol of diversity in an activity dominated by the "other," with little future prospects for ever being more than "one of the few." Consideration of the impact of my participation in academic debate on my identity became one of my major concerns as I called into question the often-asserted benefits of a debate career, especially for a young, black male.

Although my neighborhood as I was growing up was predominately black, the legal mandate of integration in Hammond, Indiana assured my educational experience from the first grade on would be diverse. High school for me was leading a double life, split between my almost exclusive African-American social interaction, and my academic life with debate at the center, dominated by whites. Although very different, I learned to live and thrive in both cultures, primarily by spending enough time participating in each. I felt at home when my identity found room for a variety of cultural experiences, and participation in one culture was not to the exclusion of the other.

My undergraduate stint at a small college in South Dakota left my black cultural identity a fond memory of my years in Hammond. Few visits home and increasing interaction with whites in all segments of my life changed the nature of the equation. Code-switching, the practice of learning to identify and adapt across a variety of cultural settings (Hecht, Ribeau, and Collier 89), became less and less relevant to my day-to-day life, as my primary and sole focus was to become a nationally-competitive debater. While I still recognized that I was one of the few African-Americans participating in academic debate, I forgot what blackness meant in my personal experience, and consequently I neglected a fuller understanding of the significance of my success and/or failure in the activity. In other

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words, I lost the consciousness associated with my black cultural identity. The chip on my shoulder was lost as well. I no longer thought about goals like the need for me to find ways to share the benefits of debate with others who looked like me. The "good of my people" was a phrase lost on someone trying to become "the other," as I chose to remake myself in the image of the debate community, losing many attributes of my prior cultural identity. Many proponents of integration would argue in favor of this type of declining significance of race. However, I disagree, for I assimilated and consequently I was not at home.

When I returned to Northwest Indiana after college, my black friends from high school questioned aloud my "blackness," noticing changes in my language, dress, style, even philosophy towards life. My friends pondered what my debate experience had done *to* me, as opposed to *for* me. I no longer could code-switch on demand, but instead locked my identity into the debate culture as part of an all-white secondary education. My immediate response was to question my so-called "friends" and to assume that I had "outgrown" their companionship. Although it took ten years, I later understood that my friends were correct; I failed to grow from my debate experience, but had instead been changed by it. I simply failed to acknowledge or fully understand the shift in my dominant identity during my undergraduate experience until the first "Diversity Recruitment and Retention in Debate Ideafest."

Two events brought clarity to my thinking about blackness, identity, and debate. When Dr. Larry Moss, director of the Atlanta Urban Debate League, spoke in a diversity training lecture, about his experience in moving from Watts, Los Angeles to suburban Claremont College, chills went up my spine. The similarities surprised me, scared me, and offered solidarity to me, as I recognized that my life experiences were not isolated. Dr. Moss spoke of his assimilation process, which left his black cultural identity in South Central. Dr. Moss argued that if the asking price for black students to participate in debate was for them to give up their black cultural identity then the price was simply too much.

Later that day, a group of Atlanta Urban Debate League graduates spoke at the Ideafest. Young men and women related stories of the impact debate participation had in their lives, and provided testimony which affirmed the decision of every debate educator and administrator in the room that their work was paying off. Again however, solidarity was on my mind. When Emory student Shanara Reid discussed her participation in academic debate as a tool that facilitated her professional and personal advancement, I sat in awe of her presence. The power she commanded in her expression as a black woman, leaves one

with little doubt that her participation came without forfeiting the toll extracted during my debate experience -- the loss of my identity as young, black man. When Edward Lee masterfully expressed how debate "saved his life" and has the power to save others, I sensed something missing from the experiences Dr. Moss and I lived. Mr. Lee spoke with a focus and a determination to keep his "Eyes on the Prize," declaring that he "owed" his personal life to the coaching and training of the next generation of urban debate students. Each student demonstrated a consciousness and commitment to empower others as part of their personal responsibility, whether they remained directly tied to the activity or not.

As I worked with them and watched their interaction, I felt that a communal presence was missing from my experience as a debater. Now as an instructor and a mentor, I felt an empowering difference. Whether playing cards at night, or critiquing a demonstration debate entirely composed of people of color, or just having late-night political discussions, one thing was crystal clear -- each of them brought their collective black cultural identity with them to the activity.

The sense of purpose found in Shanara and another student, Kenya Hansford, influenced my life as an educator forever. Debate for them was a job, and excellence was the only possible outcome. As we sat in lengthy lab sessions and the group tired and consequently digressed and suffered from reduced productivity, the two women remained committed to their work, unfazed by the distractions. Many students I coach have shown a dedication and love for the activity, however, this was the first time I witnessed debaters perceiving the activity as a tool of empowerment during their participation.

But that has all changed. When 150 inner-city New York teens descended on Atlanta last summer, I was amazed by the number of students who approached me and proclaimed that debate was a "way out" of their condition. The majority of students worked until the point of exhaustion. Practice debates were occurring at two in the morning -- long past lights out, and students were literally "wearing out" lab instructors who were also caught up in the magic. With every passing day, they learned to code-switch and function in a culture very different from their own. Nevertheless, one distinct attribute stood out: The New York students brought their collective cultural identity with them. Perhaps the most glorious part of the experience was at the end of each day, when the students had their little parcel of "free time:" watching Zomega from Brooklyn signify in a "cool pose"[1] to his

[1] Majors and Bilson discuss being cool as a large part of the dilemma of black manhood in America. Cool Poses are a rite of passage into manhood, but also part of the difficulty in improving the condition of young, black males.

friend Emerson, "What's up my nigger? What did y'all do in lab today?" (both winning awards at the end of the tournament); or participating in the students ritual of listening and dancing each night in front of the dorms; or the impromptu awards ceremony the night before elimination rounds, where we celebrated the fact that six of the eight novice teams advancing were from New York, despite having had only one week of institute (due to New York State Regent's exams) as opposed to the rest of the novice debaters in the camp who had two. We "raised the roof," shouted and chanted into the night. One thing was certain, these students demanded that the activity accept their identity. And frankly, every single person at the camp was better for it. We all were at home.

On several occasions in the past few years, I have reunited with old teammates or friends from college. When I spoke about my involvement with urban debate leagues and my agenda, as one of the two or three black coaches on the policy circuit, to increase participation of African-Americans and women with a goal of empowerment, they always look surprised. One former teammate simply said she never knew these issues were important to me, as I perceived her newfound respect for me in her voice. "I forgot about my agenda in college, maybe it was too far from where I lived," I replied. "But don't worry, now I'm back at home."

Works Cited

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