

## When the Life Coach Needs Coaching: An Analysis of Iyanla Vanzant's "Healing in Ferguson" Episode

Many people expressed their apprehension on social media when OWN TV's Iyanla Vanzant, host of her highly rated TV show, *Iyanla: Fix My Life* announced that she was doing a special episode entitled, *Healing in Ferguson*. As a regular viewer of her show, I too was apprehensive. It's one thing to offer "spiritual advice" to high profile celebrities and family members dealing with familial conflict. It's another thing to inject yourself into an active federal and local investigation of the murder, by a still uncharged police officer, of unarmed, 18-year old, Michael Brown, whose death sparked days of community protest and a national conversation on racism, a militarized police, and police harassment and brutality. Iyanla took to twitter to calm our fears by tweeting, "Beloveds before you rush to judgment about one image why not wait to see the story I do not have a history of selling out my community do I?" I waited to see the story and what I saw was highly problematic and disrespectful to Michael Brown's family, to the people of Ferguson, and to people of color in general. While there were many problematic statements and scenes aired on the show, I will just highlight a few that I found most problematic.

Invariably after every incident of crime committed against Black people, the argument of "Black-on-Black" crime is brought up as a "unique" issue that the Black community needs to deal with ironically in an effort to mitigate the current grievances that people have about the specific crime at hand. A young man, Markese, who said he witnessed Brown's death first made the suggestion, stating "They don't respect us because we don't respect ourselves" the "they" referring to the police and the "we" referring to Black people in general. This sentiment is so often expressed that people do not even pause to actually analyze what was actually said. In fact, Iyanla responds, "But if we're not respecting ourselves, we're teaching them how to treat us" as to suggest that Brown's murder and so many other Black people who unjustly die at the hands of the police is not only expected, but is the fault of other people of color. This assertion partially absolves the racist system in which we live that creates these conditions and the one man, Darren Wilson, who is solely responsible for Michael Brown's death. I counted at least four other times where this assertion was repeated. In a conversation with Alderman French, Iyanla asked, "We are killing each other every single day. If that's going on in our community, I'm speaking of specifically communities of color. If that is going on every single day, what is the upset, what's the upset?" and then later to two different groups of people from the community, "When you kill each other are you giving people permission to come in and kill you?" "Is it possible that because we have remained silent while our children were shooting each other that we have taught people that it's ok to shoot us. Is that possible?" These assertions are not only problematic, they are abusive to people of color and deny us our humanity and dignity. As many writers have pointed out for years, most crime against others occurs within race because people within the same race are more proximal to each other. However, "white-on-white" crime is not even used in our lexicon but "black-on-black" crime is seen as a racial pathology that justifies our continued and centuries-old oppression and abuse from others. Just looking at a few of the high profile massacres (e.g., Sandy Hook, Aurora, etc.) that were carried out by White men, it would have been ludicrous for anyone to suggest that these horrific acts of violence were justified and expected because White people don't respect each other. Likewise, it would be ludicrous to suggest that since White people don't respect each other, then they shouldn't be upset that other

people kill them since they kill each other. But when it comes to Black people, too many people not only feel comfortable making these illogical and hurtful statements, they also cavalierly promote these assertions as the “gospel” and remedy for ending crime against Black people while never addressing the real economical, sociological, political, and psychological issues at work to continue to oppress, marginalized, and abuse people of color.

What I find most ironic is that despite Iyanla stating, “Because I’m an outsider, I don’t want to come into your community telling you anything” and “You have got to come together. I don’t know where. I don’t know how. I didn’t come to tell you how to do your business.” she spends the entire episode perpetuating these harmful racial myths and telling the people of Ferguson what they need to do and what they have been doing wrong. The irony reached its nadir when Iyanla arrogantly corrected (under the guise of coaching) the citizen’s chant, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” by stating that was wrong and they should say instead “Hands Up, See Me.” How arrogant and ironic is that? There is nothing wrong with the chant that the people of Ferguson came up with, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” as it exactly expresses their desire and request. It seems ridiculous to point out the obvious, but Iyanla, the police can already see Black people as they have been successful in killing us! If they didn’t see us, perhaps we would be safer! People of Ferguson and supporters, keep shouting, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot!”

As expected, the conversation turned to asking several Black men in the community if they grew up without a father. Some did and some did not. This question is problematic because it perpetuates this illogical idea that fathers can solve all of these social ills (specifically fathers of color as this question never comes up when talking about tragedies within White communities). If only children would have their fathers in their lives, then we would live in this utopia. Melissa Harris-Perry and others call this the myth of the super hero black father. The reality is that no organization, church, program, university, or group could have prevented Michael Brown’s death or the death of others like him because the problem is not our failure to engage in activism, but instead the problem is the racist system that permeates American culture that criminalizes Black and Brown bodies for just being. Did I mention already that 18 days after Michael Brown’s death, the officer that shot him, Darren Wilson, is still a free man and uncharged??? On top of that, his supporters have raised more money for him than supporters have been able to raise for the Michael Brown Memorial Fund (let’s not even talk about some of the racist comments on his gofundme page).

There were other problematic statements that were made in Iyanla’s Healing in Ferguson episode, but as I write this, I feel too much pain to continue to analyzed them all. Was everything that Iyanla said in this episode problematic? No, it wasn’t. For example, pointing out to the police chief of Ferguson that race was an essential issue in this case was entirely correct. However, there were so many problematic statements in the episode that the few good points were lost among the many bad points made in the episode. What is also very evident is that Iyanla’s episode engaged in a lot of victim blaming and put on display the double victimization and attack that so many women and people of color experience when we are victimized by sexist, racist, and oppressive systems. In true jujitsu form, we have the script flipped on us and find ourselves blamed for our own victimization and told that we have to do all the work to stop ourselves from being victimized again! That becomes the conversation and the true injustice is never seriously debated so real solutions remain elusive yet again. Iyanla Vanzant, I hope you

are also willing to be coached and able to see how problematic your statements and episode were. Will you “respect us” and publically apologize for your actions in Ferguson?

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