

March 29, 2006

## Awaiting the Restoration of Confidence: A Letter to the Duke University Administration

Television screens tuned in to MSNBC on the morning of March 29, 2006 broadcast a headline in bold red: DUKE RAPE? At the bottom right corner of the front page of The New York Times on the same day was an article about the rape allegations roiling Duke University. How is a Duke community citizen to respond to such a national embarrassment from under the cloud of a "culture of silence" that seeks to protect white, male, athletic violence and which apparently prevents all university citizens from even surveying the known facts? How can one begin to answer the cardinal question: What have Duke and its leadership done to address this horrific, racist incident alleged to have occurred in a university-owned property in the presence of members of one of its athletic teams?

The alleged crimes of rape, sodomy, and strangulation of a black woman at a party populated in some measure by the Duke lacrosse team reportedly occurred on March 13. University administrators knew about and had begun to respond internally within twenty-four hours following the incident. But Duke University citizens had no public word from our university leadership until President Richard Brodhead called a press conference on March 28. Two weeks of silent protectionism left all of us vulnerably ignorant of the facts. Receiving emails and telephone calls of concern from friends nationally and internationally, we have been deeply embarrassed by the silence that seems to surround this white, male athletic team's racist assaults (by words, certainly - deeds, possibly) in our community.

It is virtually inconceivable that representatives of Duke University's Athletic Department would allow its lacrosse team to engage in regular underage drinking and out-of-control bacchanalia. It is difficult to imagine a competently managed corporate setting in which such behavior would be tolerated (and swept under the rug), or where such a "team" would survive for more than a day before being tossed out on its ears by security. Moreover, in a forthrightly ethical setting with an avowed commitment to life-enhancing citizenship, such a violent and irresponsible group would scarcely be spirited away, or sheltered under the protection of pious sentiments such as "deplorable" - a judgment that reminds us of Miss Ophelia in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, saying that slavery was "perfectly horrible." Such timorous piety and sentimental legalism, in the opinion of the author James Baldwin, constitutes duck-and-cover cowardice of the first order.

There is no rush to judgment here about the crime - neither the violent racial epithets reported in a 911 call to Durham police, nor the harms to body and soul allegedly perpetrated by white males at 610 Buchanan Boulevard. But there is a clear urgency about the erosion of any felt sense of confidence or safety for the rest of us who live and work at Duke University. The lacrosse team - 15 of whom have faced misdemeanor charges for drunken misbehavior in the past three years - may well feel they can claim innocence and sport their disgraced jerseys on campus, safe under the cover of silent

whiteness. But where is the black woman who their violence and raucous witness injured for life? Will she ever sleep well again? And when will the others assaulted by racist epithets while passing 610 Buchanan ever forget that dark moment brought on them by a group of drunken Duke boys? Young, white, violent, drunken men among us - implicitly boasted by our athletic directors and administrators - have injured lives. There is scarcely any shame more egregious than one that wraps itself in the pious sentimentalism of liberal rhetoric as though such a wrap really constituted moral and ethical action.

Duke University's higher administration has engaged in precisely such a tepid and pious legalism with respect to the disaster of recent days: the actual harm to the body, soul, mind, and spirit of black women who were in the company of Duke University lacrosse team members as far as any of us know. All of Duke athletics has now been drawn into the seamy domains of Colorado football and other college and university blind-eying of male athletes, veritably given license to rape, maraud, deploy hate speech, and feel proud of themselves in the bargain.

Many citizens have weighed in, and one hopes all departments, programs, and concerned members of our university community will speak out forcefully for swift and considered corrective action.

But of course, it is not exclusively our academic administration that seems to have refused decisive and meaningful action. The most deafening silence - and, quite possibly, duplicity (which is to say, improbable denial) - has marked, in fact, Duke's Department of Athletics. Where was Joe Alleva before Tuesday's press conference called by President Brodhead? Where now is the commercial charisma of Coach K, who could certainly be out front condemning Duke athletes who call people out of their name from the precincts of university-owned housing? Why aren't such stalwarts of Duke athletics publicly and courageously addressing the horrors that have occurred in their own domain? We remember the very first day of our new President's administration - how he and Coach K shared the media dais, and the basketball magnate was praised for his bold leadership. It all seems rather like an Indonesian shadow play at this moment of crisis. All a show.

What is precipitously teetering in the balance at this point, during weeks marked by inaction and duck-and-cover from our designated leaders is, well, confidence.

It is very difficult to feel confidence in an administration that has not addressed in meaningful ways the horrors that have occurred to actual bodies, to the Durham community of which we are an integral part, and to our sense of being members of a proactive and caring community. Rather, gag orders and trembling liberal rhetorical spins seem to be behaviors du jour from our leaders.

There can be no confidence in an administration that believes suspending a lacrosse season and removing pictures of Duke lacrosse players from a web page is a dutifully moral response to abhorrent sexual assault, verbal racial violence, and drunken white male privilege loosed amongst us.

How many mandates concerning safe, responsible campus citizenship must be transgressed by white athletes' violent racism before our university's offices of administration, athletics, security, and publicity courageously declare: enough!

How many more people of color must fall victim to violent, white, male, athletic privilege before coaches who make Chevrolet and American Express commercials, athletic directors who engage in Miss Ophelia-styled "perfectly horrible" rhetoric, higher administrators who are salaried at least in part to keep us safe, and publicists who are supposed not to praise Caesar but to damn the unconscionable ... how many? Before they demonstrate that they don't just write books, pay lip service, or boast of safe citizenship ... but actually do step up morally, intellectually, and bravely to assume responsibilities of leadership for such citizenship. How many?

How soon will confidence be restored to our university as a place where minds, souls, and bodies can feel safe from agents, perpetrators, and abettors of white privilege, irresponsibility, debauchery and violence?

Surely the answer to the question must come in the form of immediate dismissals of those principally responsible for the horrors of this spring moment at Duke. Coaches of the lacrosse team, the team itself and its players, and any other agents who silenced or lied about the real nature of events at 610 Buchanan on the evening of March 13, 2006. A day that, not even in a clichéd sense, will, indeed, always live in infamy for this university.

A responsible, and in many instances appalled - and yes, frightened - citizenry of Duke University is waiting ... and certainly more than willing to join considered actions by bold leaders to restore confidence in a great institution and its mission. Today I polled my class whose enrollment is predominantly women and white. All said that nothing had happened in terms of this university's response that had left them anything but afraid. The shame of this is unconscionable. Still, these women will surely sleep better this evening than the black woman injured at 610 Buchanan Boulevard by the white lacrosse team's out-of-control violent partying will ever again rest in her life.

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