

## **Eulogy for Samuel Townes**

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Those of you who know me know that I loved my father dearly. But what you probably don't know is just how proud of him I am. I'm proud of what he overcame and accomplished. I'm as proud of him as he was of me. Considering the facts, I think it's simply amazing that he had such a good life because the odds were stacked against him.

I'm astounded that a Black boy born into poverty in 1948, in racially segregated America, who dropped out of high school one month shy of graduation, volunteered for military service and was critically wounded in the Vietnam War, lived through the racial turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, struggled with alcoholism, used drugs, and on more than one occasion contemplated suicide was, in the end, able to have such a happy and successful life. Why was he able to overcome circumstances that have caused so many others to fall and not get back up? The short answer to that question is that one who is right with God will have great joy. And the father who imparts wisdom to his children will be glad in them. If you know my father at all then you

already know that he had gotten right with God. I'm here today to testify as to how he was as a father.

When I reflect on my father's time on this earth, there's a story about him from his childhood that gives some insight into who he was as a person. My father was the youngest son and second youngest child among his six siblings and a half-sister from his father's first marriage. He was small in stature. Some might have called him the runt of the family. And like many people, he was a little tied-tongue as a very young child. As the story goes, when my father was perhaps just four years old, he and his family were having a meal around the table one day as usual. A debate broke out about something. I don't exactly remember what they say the topic of discussion was but that's not all that important to the story. Even though my father was probably only four years old, he didn't hesitate to chime in with his take on the topic. And as you might expect, his brothers and sisters thought he was wrong and were very vocal about saying so. But my father didn't back down and the debate got heated. Finally, my grandfather weighed in and said "Hold on everybody. You all know Sammy is right." At which point my father defiantly pronounced in his four-year old, tongue-tied manner, "Ya damn wight I'm wight."

That story tells you a lot about my father. He loved being around his family. He was happy when he was around people. He enjoyed telling stories with family and friends. The fact of the matter is that my father just liked to talk. He was highly intelligent and quick-witted. He was strong-willed and wouldn't hesitate to share his opinion. If he felt strongly about something, he wasn't afraid to stand his ground. And even though he loved to tell jokes, he took serious things seriously.

Now my father wasn't perfect by long shot and he would be the first to admit it. But he was better than most. He had plenty of rough patches in his life and there was a time when his connection to God was strained but it never broke. Eventually he found his way back to the Lord.

Pop took his responsibilities as a father seriously and he tried to impart wisdom to me. He tried to instill in me many of the qualities that made him who he was. He did his best under the circumstances. But when I was growing up his parenting style was more do as I say, not as I do.

Whenever he went out he always let me tag along with him. In fact I can't remember a time that he ever said no when I asked to go with him somewhere. I was happy to be around my father and he was happy to have me around. As a child I was always with my father. So much so, that his friends never

called me by my name. They called me “little Sam.” My father taught me many of life’s lessons while he was driving an old 1972 Pontiac Lemans and I was riding shotgun.

My father’s relationship with his own father was strained in his teenage years. This was a big part of why he wanted a close relationship with me. And we were close. My mother would often tell the story of when I was a baby just learning how to talk and I would see my mother and father sitting together watching television. I would stop what I was doing and wedge myself between them. And I would say to my mother “Bove. Bove over, mama. My daddy.”

When I was growing up, my father was my best friend. In fact when I was growing up I didn’t call him “dad” or “daddy”. I called him “Sammy.” My mother didn’t understand this but she didn’t need to understand. My father and I understood.

Sometimes parents struggle to find a way to really connect with their children. My father chose baseball as the conduit to build his relationship with me. I was told that when my mother was pregnant with me, my father went out and bought a baseball glove for me. Not a child’s glove but an adult-sized red, green, and white outfielder’s glove. My mother asked him why he would spend all of that money on such a thing when I wasn’t even born yet. They didn’t know whether I was a boy or

a girl much less whether or not I would even like baseball. My father's response was that it didn't matter. Boy or girl, his child would like baseball because it was in the genes. It turns out he was right. If he could speak to us now he'd probably say "Ya damn wright I was wright."

My father coached my baseball team. Many of our most important conversations occurred in the car going to or from baseball practice or a game. One of my happiest childhood memories with my father involved baseball. I started playing Khoury league baseball at Mathews-Dickey when I was about seven years old. As you can guess, I was the smallest one on the field. And they stuck me in right field, which is where they often put the worst kid on the team. When my turn came to bat one inning, I put on my helmet and nervously went to the batter's box. My father was in the first base coach's box. The first time I swung the bat I missed the ball and spun around. The helmet was too big for me and it spun around too. I remember hearing my father shout to me "That's okay. Remember what I told. Keep you back elbow up and your eyes on the ball." The next time I swung the bat I hit the ball deep into the right-center field gap and took off running. I remember seeing my father giving me the run signal at first base. Once I saw that I just kept going and didn't stop. I

rounded all the bases and as I crossed home plate my father was there waiting for me. I jumped into his arms and he lifted me in the air. Now, he was only 5'5" so he couldn't lift me very high but it felt like I was in the clouds. My teammates were all around and everyone was cheering. My father was smiling up at me. It was the greatest feeling. There is no word adequate enough to describe it. And I've been chasing that feeling ever since – seeking that smiling approval from my father. That's how a father is supposed to make his child feel. A lot of people never get to experience that feeling. I'm fortunate that my father made sure I did.

When my parents divorced, the bond between me and my father was strained, but it never broke. Eventually, we found our way back to each other. That was probably one of his most important lessons he taught me. A father never gives up on his child. He certainly never gave up on me.

I believe Pop knew the end was near. The last time I was physically with him was the Saturday before he passed. Uncle George had been in town visiting with him for the previous couple of weeks and was leaving the next day. Uncle George, my father, my wife Tina and I all went out to dinner. By this time Pop was having problems getting around and would get winded quickly. But he was determined to go out with us to

dinner. I don't think anyone could have stopped him if they tried. At dinner, my father talked with us. He and Uncle George told stories. And Pop laughed with us as Uncle George declared that reality television hasn't been the same since they took Flavor Flav off the air. Pop was happy. He was in his element. And I think it was his way of saying goodbye to us. The day before he passed I spoke to him briefly over the phone. And we said "I love you" to each other for the last time.

The day he passed away, I believe he knew the end was at hand. He called his wife home so that he could see her one last time. And then he sent her away on an errand. My father knew his passing would cause deep sorrow for my step-mother. He knew it would cause great sadness for my step-brothers and step-sisters. He knew that it would cause intense pain for my uncles and aunts. He knew it would cause profound anguish for my cousins. And he knew it would cause overwhelming grief for me. I know that he wanted to spare us from all of that if he could. But I'm sure he didn't want to be alone in his final moments. I'm sure he wanted to be with family. And knowing my father, I'm sure he prayed about it.

I believe God answered his prayer. I believe God chose the strongest among us to be with my father as he left this world. That turned out to be my step-sister Lawanda. God chose her

to bear witness to such an important moment. It wasn't misfortune that she was the one to be with Pop as he gave up the ghost. That was God's grace. And I'm so glad that she was there to do what she could for Pop as he slipped into the loving embrace of the Lord.

There are more than 7.5 billion people on this planet. Many of us who are assembled here today are among the privileged few who can say that they walked the earth with Samuel Townes and had the chance to know him personally. We all have our "Sammy" stories. He would want us to hold on to them and share them with one another. He would want us to remember those stories when we think about him and be happy for his life and not sad about his passing.

I just want to say one last time – Pop, I love you and I am so proud of you. When it comes to fathers, I was damn lucky to have you as mine.

I'll close by speaking on behalf of my father and say to everyone gathered here today and to those who wanted to be here but couldn't – blessings to you all; and go with God.