

## WHAT ACTOR DAVID OYELOWO CAN TEACH YOU ABOUT ASSERTING YOUR SENSE OF SELF

*Have You're Own Mind So You Can Challenge Others' Expectations The Right Way*

By “asserting” yourself, I don’t mean yelling loudly *this is who I am!* I mean frankly, quite the opposite. I mean knowing how you think and feel about situations regardless of what your inner voices and the voices from outside (hint: they’re the same) are saying.

One of the best examples of this I heard was in an interview with actor

David Oyelowo. Oyelowo is known for his bona fide portrayal of Martin Luther King Jr. in *Selma* and in one of my personal favorite performances, the portrayal of Prince Seretse Khama in *A United Kingdom*. The interview I’m referring to is on the show *Off Camera With Sam Jones* (if you are an actor, or into filmmaking, performing, writing, or music then watch that show). The whole interview is an hour long and it is incredible. I go back to it frequently for reference; it is one of the most concise and elevated conversations about acting and filmmaking out there.

Of all the predictable barriers to self-hood, Oyelowo would have faced growing up (racism, xenophobia, etc.)—the biggest barrier in his life? His relationship with his father. But despite his father’s vehement disapproval of Oyelowo’s chosen profession and chosen spouse, Oyelowo ultimately credits his Nigerian immigrant father with raising him with a mind of his own.

This is a brief excerpt from the interview which illustrates my point:

*“I got terribly bullied when I was younger. I remember an incident where I was probably about fifteen. I was bullied by this kid who had repeated the year I was in two or three times. He was like 6’4 and looked older than the teacher.... He was constantly saying to me, ‘you think you’re better than me don’t you.’ Because I respected my teachers, I did my work, I wore my uniform properly. I didn’t go truant from school. And he cornered me in the bathroom one day and punched me square in the face saying, ‘you think you’re better than me, don’t you.’ And I went home with this swollen jaw to my dad, just real hate in my heart towards this guy. And I explained the situation to my dad. And he said to me, ‘was that boy right about what he said about you?’*

*‘No he wasn’t right.’*

*‘Ok, carry on. You know who you are. He told a lie. Carry on.’*

*And that is what I did to my dad. ‘You’re not right.’ Because he raised me to have my own mind about challenging situations.”*What do I learn from this? Nothing short of the most important rule of power:

*Always give credit to the master.* Even though Oyelowo’s father gave him intense resistance for his life choices, he not only forgives his father—but in a brilliant twist, credits him for giving him the impetus to make his own decisions in the first place. This is a wonderfully self-aware tactic that frees both him and his enemy (in this case, the enemy is his father’s expectations) from the burden of resentment.

Oyelowo also relates the story of when his Nigerian immigrant father saw him play Henry VI at the Royal Shakespeare company and said, “I can’t believe they let a Black man play the king of England. And he is... *my son?*”

In Oyelowo’s words, his father is now “my biggest fan” and “loves my wife more than he loves

me.”

Of course, it helps that he is wildly successful. But how could he have known that starting out? Some of us are in our fifties and have not escaped the need to throw a tantrum whenever the world tries to place us into a box.

Oyelowo could have played the rebellious card and screamed and shouted and been an actor and eloped out of spite.

He chose instead to come from a place of *self-hood*. And self-hood always encompasses the other—even when they pose a threat. Especially when that other plays the role of your superior. And you know what? That sense of self is reflected in his work ethic. He trained at one of the best acting schools in the world, was the first Black man to play a king at the Royal Shakespeare Company and the second youngest person to play a king at that. When he came to America to pursue better opportunities in film, he didn’t bemoan the rejections he was receiving in England (even the racist ones); he didn’t go knocking on doors—he wrote his own thirty-page treatment for a film about eighteenth-century boxing sensation Bill Richmond. He married his wife of eighteen years at the age of twenty-two. This man is *serious*. He knows what he wants and he goes for it.

I’m not saying that you shouldn’t listen to people who have more expertise or experience than you (hence, *always give credit to the master*). I’m saying that if you don’t know your own point of view first, it is impossible to actually listen to others.

One of the hardest aspects of pursuing your dreams? Knowing how much you’re going to let loved ones down. They can’t help having their expectations of you—some of your family members *build their entire lives around their expectations of you*. And that is not something that can be easily ignored. And it certainly cannot be disrespected.

But it must be challenged.

Have the wisdom to tune out the lies and the strength to respect other’s expectations without allowing them to be imposed upon you.

Remember.

You know who you are.

Carry on.

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