

What Kind Of Men Cry?

JUST why *aren't* men supposed to cry?

Who says a guy has to be "soft" just because *Clair de Lune* leaves him moist-eyed or racial rottenness in the South makes him sob with rage?

Why does he have to be "weak" or "sentimental" or "unmasculine" just because he finds that sometimes a good boo-hoo is just as effective as (and much less expensive than) a good psychiatrist for releasing built-up feelings and relieving tensions and emotional strain?

Some years ago, at the age of 71, Bill (Bojangles) Robinson stood on a New York theater stage with tears in his eyes and confessed: "This is the first time in my whole career that I've ever let an audience see me cry." The great dancer had been sitting in the theater watching a Negro youngster still in his teens go through a brilliant dance routine that had brought the crowd to its feet with applause. Bojangles had rushed onto the stage, hugged the boy, and then burst into tears. Asked why he had cried, he said: "I guess it was because I could see so much talent in that kid . . . he really has got something in those feet."

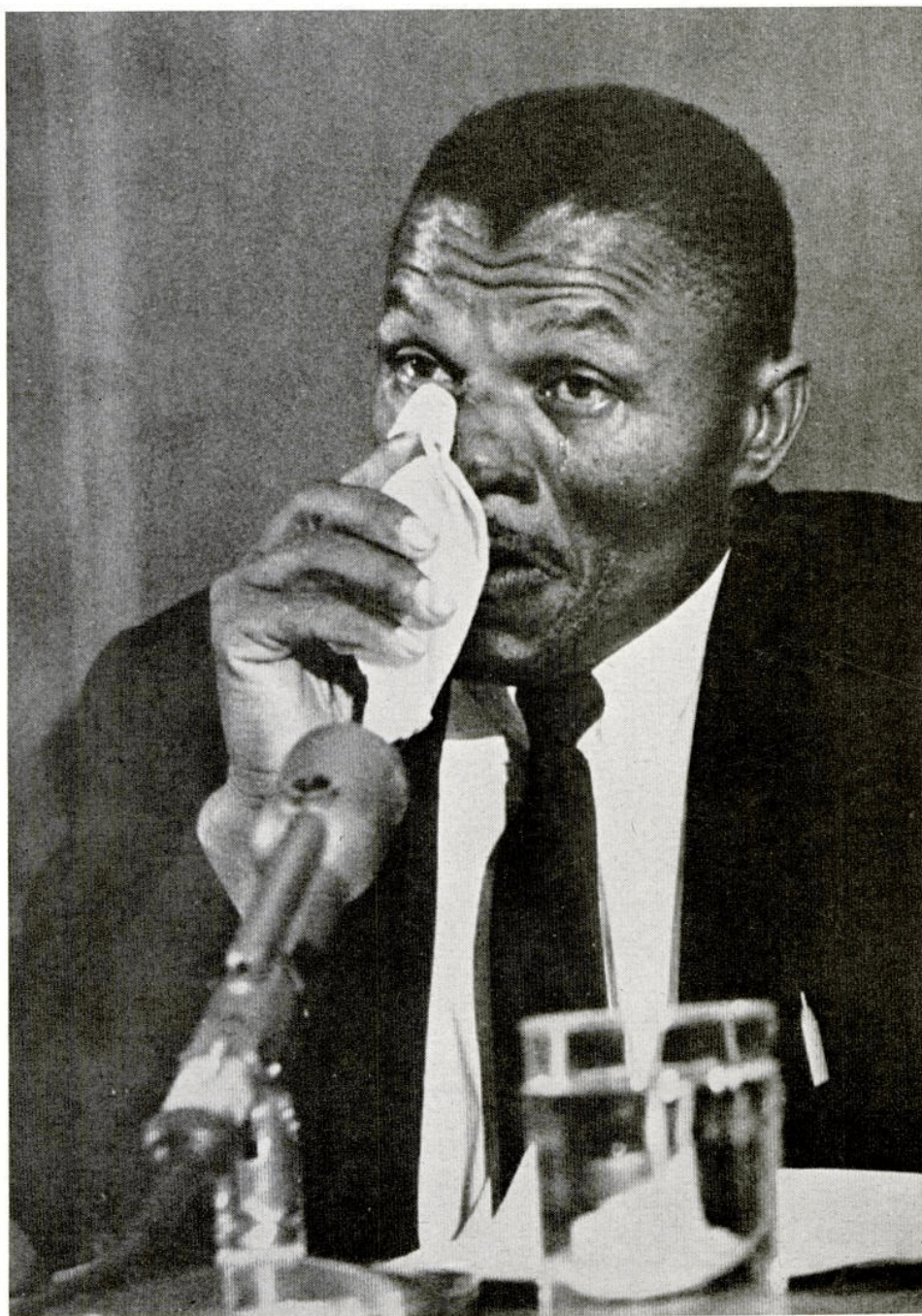
But everyone knew that Bojangles had cried for a far deeper reason. The young dancer certainly was a reminder of the old man's own beginning more than 50 years earlier as a poor boy full of fears and hopes for a theater career. Perhaps Bojangles, though he did not know that he was but a few days away from death, had sat in the dimness of the theater watching the agile youth and being reminded of the shortness of every man's years and the finality of the past. In a few moments, nostalgia and the realization of human frailty must have combined to penetrate the proud old hoofer's facade of "manliness" and "discipline," and thus gentle emotion had flowed out in tears.

Childish? A sign of weakness? Certainly not. Bojangles had simply employed what has always been a perfectly natural, and certainly harmless, means of emotional relief.

In Chicago, on an afternoon in December 1958, a searing column of flame and clouds of smoke roared up the wooden stairwell in Our Lady of the Angels School on the city's north-west side. Racing along hallways, the flames bit through classroom doors, trapping children as they clawed desperately at windows. Within minutes, 54 girls, 35 boys and three nuns—92 in all—were dead.

A fireman, his face twisted in grief, brought out a seven-year-old boy. Then he went back and brought out a little girl. After a third trip back into the smoking ruins of the school, the fireman sat down on the tailgate of a fire truck and cried. He cried uncontrollably for about five minutes. Then he stood up, wiped away the tears, and went back to the job of searching through the burned-out classrooms and

Baldwin, Belafonte, Poitier Are Among Men Who Give Their Views On Subject



Finding emotional relief in tears as pressure builds up during testimony before Senate Investigations Subcommittee, bank speculator Bernard S. Garrett tells role he played in questionable real estate mortgage deal blamed for collapse of Marlin, Texas, bank.



As civil rights demonstrators sing *We Shall Overcome* during New York City Hall rally protesting 1963 Birmingham bombings, a man's emotions flow out in tears.

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picking through the debris. Later, he told a reporter: "I don't know why I broke up; I've seen death enough times before. But all of a sudden something built up inside me and the only way I could let it out was to sit down for a few minutes and cry."

Here was a fireman—a man of bravery, a man of great strength—who, in a brief instant, must have realized how fragile is the life of a helpless child, and how, without warning, nearly a hundred children can be denied the chance to enjoy the full span of human life. The fireman's emotions had ballooned. Before he could go on with his grim work, he had to find relief in tears.

Aside from nostalgia and tragedy, often in every man's life some kind of emotional situation develops that shakes him severely. It could be something as complicated as the fear of people and the torture of self-doubt. Or it could be such practical problems as trouble on the job or difficulty at home. When it hits, there may be no one to "talk it out" with; no wife or parent or clergyman in whom he can confide, and who can help him see his problems in a clearer light. Maybe the movie or the book or the physical activity in which some men can lose themselves fails this time, and the interesting forces outside the man and within him continue building up, each making the other worse. Then come the "weight" on the chest, the "lump" in the throat, the "band" tightening around the head. This, says the social biologist and anthropologist Ashley Montagu, is quite often the perfect time for a man to have a good cry.

But what about the discouragement in almost all cultures, and especially in America, of crying by men? From childhood, the American male is taught that "mother's little man" must not cry, that "only 'sissies' cry," that "no real man lets himself shed tears." But despite the taboos, most men do cry—probably more often than they will admit, though, doctors say, possibly less often and less freely than they should.

Almost any sports locker room attendant will tell you that even the most aggressively masculine athletes are often moved to tears after a period of extreme tension and effort. It is not unusual for rugged pro football players to "cry it out" before going to the showers, whether they've lost the game or not. And a quite famous jet airplane test pilot revealed that he seldom completes a dangerous flight without hurrying from the plane to "find a place to cry." Sometimes, he says, he can't wait, "so I just sit there in the cockpit and get it over with."

Quite simply, all that the athletes and the test pilot do is "let off the steam." They, like men in many other situations, have to "depressurize" themselves, and no one is harmed by the device they use.

Dr. James O. Bond, the epidemiologist and former assistant director of the Florida Board of Health's Bureau of Preventable Diseases, has said that men, who are more susceptible to the damaging effects of emotional tension than are women, might add years to their lives "if they would just break down and weep occasionally." Allowed to remain "bottled up inside," such tensions, he says, can result in irreparable physical harm—coronary disorders, migraine headaches, certain skin diseases and neurotic asthma, to name a few.

No doctor would, of course, suggest that all of man's emotional problems can be washed away by bawling. Tears in themselves are no solution to deep-seated anxieties. Except for purely superficial distresses—irritation, frustration, extreme fatigue, sentimentality and the like—professional help might be the only answer. Also, no one wants to see a man, or even a woman or child, break down when faced by the most minor of crises. From the Bible one learns that there is "a time to weep," and from common sense one ought to know when to exercise reasonable emotional control.

Says the novelist James Baldwin: "A man ought never to be *lacrimal*. Nobody wants to see another person simply wallowing in tears. But if something hits a man hard enough, he ought to go ahead and express himself openly. He ought to go ahead and cry. This bit that a man should always have a 'firm grip on himself' and all that jazz about men not expressing their emotions seem to have come from England around the time of the Industrial Revolution. A lot of it is phony. A man has a life like anyone else—like a woman or a child. Sometimes, like a woman or a child, a man feels the need for tears. It has always been that way. Remember Jeremiah and David in the Bible? They were great criers. And, of course, even Jesus, in one of his most trying hours, wept."

Commenting on countries in which people are more permissive toward weeping by men, Baldwin says: In Greece and Italy, for examples, men aren't ashamed of their tears. It's the Anglo-Saxon tradition that has all the taboos. It's this tradition which has all the superficial concepts of 'masculinity.' But physical qualities don't necessarily make



JAMES BALDWIN: "Why shouldn't a man cry? If something has hit him that hard, he should be able to weep if he likes. A man has a life just like anyone else—just like women and children, and sometimes a man feels the need to cry."

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a man. The thing that makes a man is the degree to which he can be involved with the life around him. On that depends how responsible he can be. And when a man is *responsible*, then he's a *man*."

How does Baldwin relieve the tensions and frustrations that plague almost all artists? "I don't really know," he says, "but I don't find myself bawling. People who know me very well know that for years and years I've kept a tight rein on my emotions. You have to. People don't accept me as simply James Baldwin. They accept me as James Baldwin, representative of 22 million Negroes. It's like that with all 'Negro celebrities.' They can't really lose their 'cool' at any time. So, what you feel, you don't dare allow to be seen.

"My first impulse to relieve frustrations and to relax is to be alone, which I can sort of do only at a typewriter or in the office by myself. It's writing that really saves me. I can't talk about my frustrations and feelings. I get tongue-tied. But I can write about them. For another man, maybe all he can do is cry."



WHITNEY YOUNG JR.: "I worry about people who can't cry or emote in some manner. It's mentally unhealthy to keep things inside of oneself. A man should act out his feelings naturally."

So, too says the actor-playwright Ossie Davis. "If a man is a complete man," he says, "he has emotions. As for myself, I feel strongly about life and I have no reservations about how my feelings sweep me . . . no reservations about cussing, dancing, or crying.

"There have been several occasions when I resorted to tears, not deliberately, not to influence people or to win friends, but, mostly, in moments of tension. I remember crying at the closing night of *Purlie Victorious*. I could hardly finish the performance. When the final curtain went down I wept for quite a while. I guess it was because the play was so close to me. I had written it and acted in it, and to see it close was just too much for me. No, I wasn't ashamed of the tears. I think it's natural to cry, and rather unhealthy to be one of those men who can't cry under any circumstance. Man is an expressive animal, and often crying is cheaper than getting ulcers, or shooting oneself or someone else."

Davis says he not only weeps in grief ("I cried at Malcolm X's grave, and I know a lot of fellows who cried when President Kennedy was shot"), but in moments of great beauty. "There are times when something is so exquisite and so overwhelming—such as a painting, or architectural beauty, or perfection on the stage that there is nothing one can do but cry.

"About frustrations, I suppose that I'm frustrated most by my own lack of organization. If I were organized I would have finished a play I started a year ago. I'm frustrated in seeing things that I've got to do—things that my very bowels itch to do, such as write, but which I can't

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always do because there are other things I must do. The other things? Well, like going to Selma or delivering Malcolm's eulogy.

"I suppose that if I just had to suddenly relieve some frustration, I'd do it by getting real mad at myself. Seriously, I haven't found a way to do it. Maybe I ought to try crying sometimes. But I'll find other artistic outlets. I used to try drinking, but that ain't no outlet. It just intensified the frustrations."

The Kennedy assassination found National Urban League Executive Director Whitney Young speaking at a luncheon in Cleveland. He recalls: "I had just finished quoting from the popular song 'Blowing In the Wind.' It was that part near the end of the song which goes something like this: 'How many times must a man look up before he can see the sky . . . how many ears must one man have before he can hear people cry . . . and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows that too many people have died?' A fellow came in and announced the President's death. The luncheon ended right there, and I can remember crying without shame."

"I don't think it was a sign of 'weakness' or 'unmasculinity.' Crying has nothing to do with a man's strength. In fact, I think it is the strong man, the really strong man, who is able to vent his feelings and not be phony about it. I don't think it was 'weakness' when I found myself in tears of rage and sympathy about the deaths of those four little girls in Birmingham, and the Mississippi murders of Medgar Evers and the three young civil rights workers. I don't think it was 'sentimental' for me to be choked up over the brutality and murder in Alabama. I think I would have become physically ill if I hadn't been able to find some kind of emotional relief."

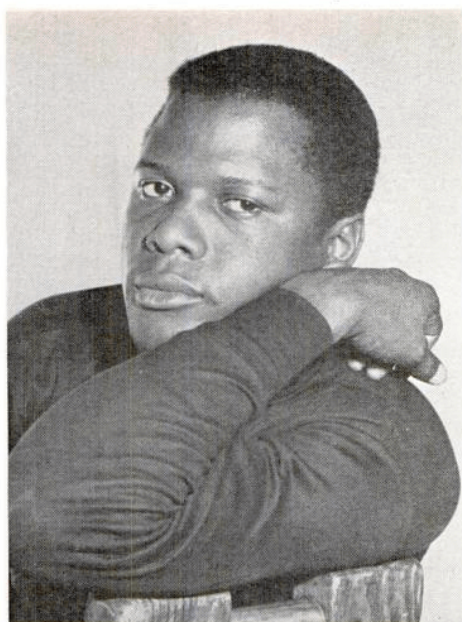
"And talk about frustrations! I'm frustrated and downright depressed over the inability of the so-called 'intelligent, decent white people'—the businessmen and the civic and community leaders—to speak out more and see the waste, and see that their own self-interests are being jeopardized by their failure to take a forthright stand on civil rights."

"One other thing. I'm frustrated about the immature and shallow-thinking people who fail to see the critical value of the Urban League program as contrasted with the more visible and demonstrative kind of thing. Some people feel that revolution is only a matter of passing laws and removing signs. They don't seem to understand the equal importance of job retraining and strengthening family life and negotiating at the top policy level in order to make the other victories real. I'm worried that we can end up with a mouthful of civil rights, but an empty stomach. How do I relieve the pressures? Well, I have certain little ways, but mainly I smoke two packs of cigarettes a day."

The actor Sidney Poitier says he came "thunderously close" to crying when his father died. "But," says Poitier, "all the Poitier men were there—my brothers—and I remember thinking that I would not let myself be the first to cry. And, actually, none of us cried—that is, not



HARRY BELAFONTE: Marching with civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Ala. (above), Belafonte saw "people with such hope in their eyes, young and old people with hope in their eyes, that I found myself crying, too."



SIDNEY POITIER:

"Men can normally cry only when their sense of masculinity is transcended momentarily by the impact of the event. When the man has time to think about how tears affect his image, he won't cry."

outwardly. I suppose we were concerned about how tears would affect our 'image,' since we knew that people generally evaluate tears as a sign of weakness in a man. But now that I think about it, I suppose that a man can, and will, cry when his sense of masculinity is transcended momentarily by the impact of an event."

Caught up in such a transcendent moment not long ago was entertainer Harry Belafonte. He recalls: "I was down in Montgomery, Ala., on the day of the great civil rights march. All of us were marching along with clasped hands, singing freedom songs. All along the way we passed people, young people and old people, standing out in front of their houses. Some of them seemed afraid to join the march, but every one of them had eyes filled with hope. Some of them were in tears. It was such a beautiful moment that I found myself crying, too."

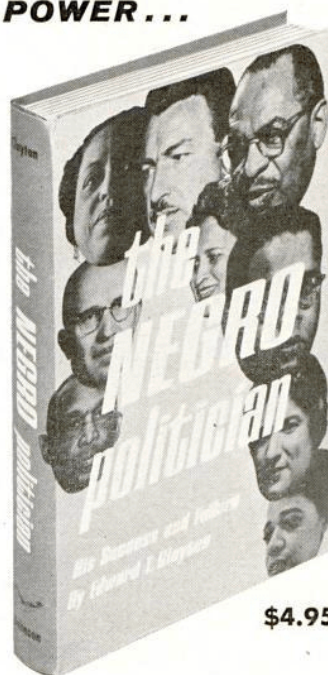
"About men crying, I don't see anything wrong with it. It depends on what a man is crying about."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once almost broke his practice of extreme emotional control. It was in Oslo, Norway, last December. Dr. King had just received the Nobel Peace Prize. Back in his room in Oslo's Grand Hotel, he sat beside his wife while, one by one, his father, mother, brother, sister and each of the friends who had made the trip told him how proud they were of him. Soon Dr. King lowered his head and his eyes filled with tears. He tried to hide them by brushing his face with his hand. But when it was his turn to speak, he admitted: "I've been fighting to hold back the tears. But when I look at all of you sitting here with me thousands of miles from home, I think of how far



After worst day of brutality in Selma, Ala., Rev. Hosea Williams (above l.) found refuge in friend's home where he relieved emotions by praying and "having a cry."

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all of us have come in the name of freedom and justice, and I don't think I can keep from crying."

Not long after that, Dr. King left the room, and everyone knew that he had gone someplace to cry. His tears were not the outpouring of frustrations or sorrow, but the result of a moment of great beauty and great joy. His tears did not seem unreasonable or inappropriate. Everyone agreed that here was a man who had a right to cry.

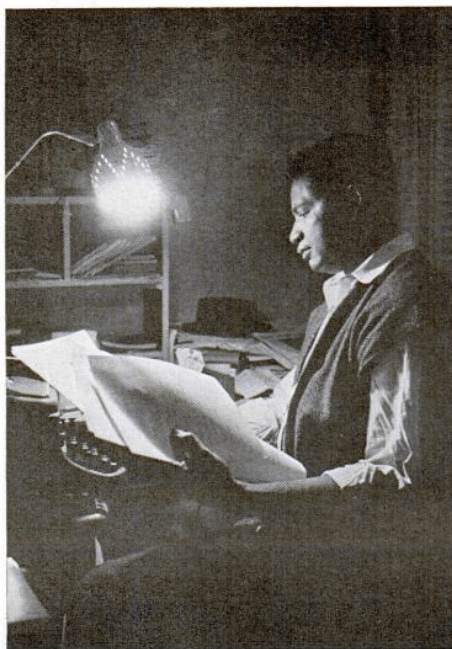
But unlike their leader, others in the civil rights movement often find in tears beneficial relief from great emotional strain. Dr. King's assistant, Rev. Andrew Young, says: "Everybody knows I'm a number one boo-hoer. They see me out there facing Sheriff Jim Clark or getting my head whipped in St. Augustine, and the kids whisper, 'Well, Andy will have a good cry tonight.' It never happens until all the trouble is over and everybody is safely off the streets. Then I steal away by myself and begin praying and thanking God that things were going O. K. That's when I have a crying good time. I bawl like a baby. All the tension has built up out there facing the mob, and you're exhausted, and you get to thinking about what could have happened, so you have to have some kind of relief. For me, it's a good old-fashion cry."

So it is with Rev. Hosea Williams, another of Dr. King's aides, and the man who was a leader of the march on the day that tear gas and clubs were used against Selma demonstrators. Says Rev. Williams: "I'm not telling anyone that I wasn't really afraid that day, but just like it was in Germany during the war, I knew I was facing a do-or-die situation. Either I went ahead, or I would die inside of myself. And that's the worst kind of death. Since I was one of the leaders, I couldn't show any stress or strain. I couldn't let the demonstrators see me break down, or they might have also broken down and gone into hysteria. In a situation like that, each person depends on the other for strength, and if there is any display of emotion it surges through the crowd."

"But after that march was broken up, and the police had clubbed us and gassed us, after they had treated us in the most vicious manner I've ever seen, I went to a friend's home and closed the door to one of the rooms. That's when all of the emotion poured out. I began thinking how we had been treated, and how good God had been to us. I must have sat in that room and wept for an hour. But it was a private display of emotion. It damaged no one, and it helped me get new strength for the next day's work."

So there *are* reasons for men to cry: in situations of grief, of nostalgia, of sympathy, of appreciation of beauty and perfection, of poignant joy, and to wash away trouble and tension. Properly used, the device can be an efficient emotional safety-valve. And, suggests Morton H. Hunt in his *Wisdom Of Tears*, "in permitting ourselves to weep instead of manfully repressing the impulse, we help ourselves to health. And wisdom; for in the state of physical release which tears bring, our thoughts can flow freely, and bring us insight and understanding we never knew were within our grasp."

OSSIE DAVIS: "There are moments when something is so exquisite and so overwhelming—such as a painting, or beauty, or perfection on stage, that there is nothing one can do but cry."



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