

On Returning to Old Values

There was a time when black young people going off to college would have had a future guaranteed of excellence in many ways.

Being black and going to college 100 years ago, or even just 25 years ago, was no easy thing to do.

There were no "Educational Opportunity" programs funded by state and federal governments, providing free room, board, tuition, books and spending money for incidentals, including possibly an incidental automobile with a little money left for gas.

Nor was there anything like what we know of today as "social promotion" (i.e., automatic passing marks, regardless of the quality of one's work). There was not any "hustling" of teachers like many frustrated blacks today are doing on our white campuses—and black campuses, too—when the going seems just a bit hard.

The old days had little, if any, of the modern ease. But there was another kind of atmosphere which provided, in a manner and degree which is rare today, an immense sense of dignity, grace...and the promise of a productive life of service to others along with the incomparable reward of continuous personal growth.

Most of the black students of yesteryear had to work their way through school. Work combined with study has its major asset in bringing a sense of realism functioning with the college campus as well as one's personal life in the world.

Without continuous hard work—in one's gainful occupation and in one's lifelong searching out of truth in many artistic, literary and practical or scientific forms—life becomes either barren or a "hustle" or perhaps both.

Black students in the past were also much better equipped than many white or black students of today to deal with life's many challenges. This was due to their having had to study the classic literature of man's past.

For black students in particular, there has been the illusion that what has been taught from the past is of scant relevance to them.

Not so. Our "European teachers" have bent reality a bit by claiming that priceless thought from the ancient olive-skinned Mediterranean world was European in the modern world sense.

Most of the Old Testament lore and wisdom we know today was rooted in central African life and

legend.

Another value of life lost to present day black youth is represented by the social graces.

So many black youth of the "unpressed jeans" and "no shirt and tie" variety learn, or are encouraged in this style of life, by large numbers of what seem to be their white peers.

There are several fictions here. One is that we are never the peers of whites in America in the fullest sense. Again, what some black students do not comprehend is that many of the jeans-dressed white students have Brooks Brothers or Hickey-Freeman finely tailored suits in their wardrobes back home.

In other words, "they are ready" for the straight world where the opportunities for security and success are found.

Once more, our white college campuses, where most black students are enrolled (or caught) today, do not teach the elementary social graces. These spell the clear difference between a "hot trough" or uncultivated upbringing and the accepted norms of good breeding—whether for good or ill—by those who occupy the seats of power.

In black college life traditionally one learned at least

how to hold a knife and fork and how to be polite, according to the inherited social norms which mark us off as the well-bred or the weeds.

On most of our white college campuses, there are few, if any, who care enough to teach even the simple and helpful old ditty which goes:

*Help your lady to her seat.
Watch the hostess when to eat.*

When you're eating, close your mouth.

Wait to talk, lest food comes out.

*Never reach but always ask,
Try not to finish first or last.*

*Keep your elbows at your side,
Till "testing time"—5:25.*

The "testing time" meant that your host or hostess could always tell whether you were well trained or not by the position of your knife and fork at the end of the meal. Our knife and fork had to be placed in the 5:25 position on our plate, as though our plate were the face of a clock.

Black youth today should know that real opportunity is controlled by those in power. A broad knowledge of their ways—whether we always use it or not—holds the key to security and success.

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