

LISTEN TO THE BLACK GRADUATE, YOU MIGHT LEARN SOMETHING

Published in *Esquire*, September 1969

It was commencement day on College Hill and I was making my way leisurely across the green as if I had not a care in the world. Actually, I had many cares, and the graduation gown's length kept me from strutting. I was carrying a seven-inch baton, my class marshal badge was pinned to my chest. I spotted a black Brown graduate of two years earlier moving toward me.

We exchanged greetings. He looked at my badge and my baton.

“So you're the colored class marshal this year, huh? I was the one for 1964.”

It was a joke of course, the sort of self-critical humor that blacks engage in with full knowledge of the truth that lies beneath the surface of the witticism. Every time a black man encounters discrimination, he must, if he is on his feet, have an appreciation for the intrinsic humor of the event, for prejudice itself is a product of the half-wit mind.

But he may have had something there, and every time I look back on my collegiate experience to try to gain a perspective on the zeal of black students on predominantly white campuses today, I begin with that put-down.

There were only twelve class marshals who would lead the line in its march down the hill, I was thinking. Weren't we all leaders or something on campus? Or had I been chosen only to add some color to the ceremony? Quickly, as if I were reviewing my notes before an exam, I recounted my four years: frosh basketball manager, Inter-House Council secretary, distinction in English lit, proctor of Hope College...

So it must be that uncertain role I played, that confusion of what I was about, which gives shape to any comparison of my years in school with blacks in college this term. The overriding theme here must be this: role-playing.

Freshman week, 1962. I was bopping this time across the College Green. I saw another black face bouncing on tall shoulders, heading toward me, and I had to clear my throat to overcome the temptation to shout at him. Finally. It was another brother, and I felt safer, more comfortable. We shook hands and asked each other the same question at the same time, laughing at the verbal coincidence: “How many others have you seen?” Maybe two, maybe three, but not too many. Eventually, we counted about eight of us out of a class of 659.

It was only natural that we stuck together, and I can understand why this same kind of conscious separatism exists and baffles administrators on predominantly white college campuses today. The black students always sit together in the cafeteria, they insist. There

we were, way up in New England, surrounded by white middle- and upper-classes who had prepared at Exeter, Lawrenceville, Groton; whose fathers were Wall Street brokers and resident surgeons and corporation lawyers; who had spent the summer in Switzerland; who would have a larger allowance for a month than I would see for a semester. In other words, the common ground between black student and white student is so uncommon, the possibility of a badly needed entente is so slight, that it shouldn't seem so unusual for black students to spend that perfect opportunity to mix and talk—at mealtime—with other blacks.

Even the New England accent wasn't our bag. I remember reporting to coach on the first day of basketball practice.

“Go put the balls on the cart over there,” coach said.

I stood and looked around the gym.

“What cart?” I asked.

“What cart! What kind of manager will you make. Don't you even know what a basketball cart is?” I finally interpreted it: he meant *court*.

As the months passed on, however, and I became familiar with white students—a hockey game in the dormitory hallway, a casual discussion in the john, a borrowing of notes for a missed lecture—I found that these acquaintances would come over and join us at lunch. And we didn't mind; in fact, we welcomed it. But that entrance of the white student into the gastronomic coterie was always their decision—probably prompted by a degree of courage, a measure of curiosity and perhaps a belief on the part of some sensitive individuals that they knew why we sat alone.

When we were asked why we sat together, we would explain that it was elementary, my dear Watson. In human situations, contrary to the laws of physics, likes attract. And opposites, observing the attraction of likes, tend to be repelled.

Frequently, we black freshmen discussed our high-school experiences. Inevitably, after trading episodes, we came to the conclusion that we had had more fun and felt more comfortable in high school than we perhaps ever would at Brown. The milieu (of course we expected a change) was different, so strange. This was the question on our minds: why should black students attending one of the top schools in the country have to sacrifice so much to obtain a superior education?

Brown had been my first choice. When I told a guidance counselor I had been accepted by the seventh oldest university in the country, he said, “I didn't know you had applied to Brown,” and I was instantly glad I hadn't told him.

All through my first semester of freshman year I kept my fingers crossed that the admissions office would not find out I had had my secondary-school class presidency

usurped. It started with a speech I gave at a P.T.A. meeting in the evening. After I got home, I pulled out my chemistry book to prepare for the next morning's exam. I fell asleep, book in hand, awoke too late the next day, decided to stay home instead of arriving late and receiving a detention.

The day after my truancy, I explained to the assistant-principal-in-charge-of-discipline why I had been absent. Shouldn't the class president be truthful?

About a week later, I met the class adviser outside the nurse's office. "I'd like to call a class meeting," I said.

"You ain't president no more," was his answer.

I got an audience with the principal: "This will make a better man of you, and don't worry, all information we send to Brown will say you're president."

There were several rumors advanced for my being taken out of office: the school was predominantly white and therefore most Caucasian parents didn't want a black president anyway; a couple of Jewish parents had complained to the principal of my galloping with a group of nocturnal miscreants who were secretly dating their daughters (terrible kissers). So for half a semester during my freshman year in college, I lived with the fear that someone from my hometown would write the admissions office and inform them of my political impropriety.

It didn't take us long to agree collectively that we didn't especially want to come back to begin our sophomore years. We voiced our displeasure to the administration, and we received sympathetic ears. We complained, they listened, suggested. Number of problems solved: none. I conducted an informal, wide-ranging survey of students at other schools and found their situations were less encouraging. Black brothers at Harvard were complaining; brothers at Penn cried, actually wept on the weekends; Cornell and Dartmouth students were isolated, so were Princetonians. The remedy for me was simple: go to the Apple. My application for a transfer to Columbia College in the City of New York was rejected, and so I was back in Providence to begin my second year, resigned to make the best of it.

There just weren't enough of us, but no one ever suggested that we could amend this fantastic inequality of numbers. We took it for granted that the university had searched the countryside for qualified blacks. It wasn't difficult to reach the ego-building deduction that we were the only talented Negroes in the country who could pass the stringent admissions policy of Brunoversity. Yet for this September, primarily through the recruiting efforts of its black students, Brown accepted 151 nonwhites (of which 70 accepted Brown)—the greatest proportionate increase of any Ivy League school. Maybe there is more talent than we cared to imagine.

Whenever we congregated, the joke went, "Don't stand around together like this, man. If a bomb drops, they've got all of us." Another was: "If they ever have a race riot here, it

will turn out to be a race massacre.” So even if all of us in the class had come to one mind about a demand and had decided to march to the dean’s office, the sheer insignificance of our numbers would have, as one Brown senior told me last year, “got each of you kicked in the butt and told to get back to the library.”

Part of the survival kit which we drew from to maintain an equilibrium during our four-year stay included an imaginary little hole. There, periodically, we dropped little bits of our own culture—bits which were substituted for the magnitude of a larger, more dominant culture. A few used “look it” instead of “dig it.” We substituted the terms “skin” for pornographic magazines, “tweed” for a cat who vined well, “jock” for an athlete, and “get laid” for sexual success.

Socially, we fell upon another phrase to explain our uncertain, confusing status: integrate or masturbate. With fewer than a half-dozen black Pembroke’s available for the brothers to date, with little money to travel and barely any acquaintance of black Providence society, we resolved that we had to brave a slap in the face, a kick in the shin. We had to ask white girls for dates if we were to keep from becoming dust collectors on the weekends. Fortunately, we were luckier than a New Yorker I know who went to school in Colorado. He dated so many white girls during his first year (“I went crazy!”), the black sisters demanded that he either take his dates to bed or to the movies; but don’t bring those white *skanks* to their parties!

Our reluctance to ask was well-founded, we thought to ourselves. Hadn’t we been programmed throughout our segregated neighborhoods to stay away from white women? And why? Because we weren’t equal, weren’t human enough to touch them. So why were we reluctant to ask girls in liberal old New England? Because we were sure we’d meet noncompliance. Deep, deep down inside, we *thought* perhaps we weren’t equal, or at least thought *they* thought it. What a role to play. On the one hand, realizing alumni all over the country were counting on us to go out into the world and hold our own against the demons from Harvard, Yale and Princeton; yet feeling inferior.

I don’t think any of us were refused a date because of our skin color, but we certainly did take unusual precautions to ensure success. Occasionally, we acted with the kind of boldness that frightened us. I can remember meeting a girl from Risdy (Rhode Island School of Design) by whistling at her from behind. She stopped, turned, smiled, and we met. A date. Another time, I walked right up to a girl sketching on the sidewalk, sat down and started rapping. (If the girls had been black, the techniques used to meet them would have been less eligible for commendation. But to use these boldacious methods for white chicks—we were breaking new ground!)

Sometimes our audacity took the form of comedy. Once my room-mate and I had five girls posing in Wranglers on the grass. We were taking pictures of them. After the impromptu photo session, we took all the names and phone numbers down so “we can call when the pictures are developed.” Since we had no film in the camera, the only thing that developed was a list of five possible chicks. Another score.

I don't think the brothers have so many hangups about their social roles now, and the reasons are two-fold. First, there is a substantial number of black foxes on campus, and secondly, the new sense of black pride on campus is nurturing a new attitude about what is called interracial dating. I asked a senior during my last trip on the hill about black-white romancing.

"It's done," he said, "but none of us take it seriously, nobody thinks he's in love." And we used to cry almost when a white Pembroke, after pushing your advancing chest away, would beg you not to take this thing seriously. Now the brothers are doing the admonishing.

I used to note with pride that Brown is the only college in the country offering a concentration program in Egyptology. The lamentable fact that not one course required the reading of W.E.B. DuBois or Frederick Douglass or Richard Wright wasn't so lamentable to me. (Last year they offered a course in black literature). And none of us bothered to ask why, none of us demanded that all the chips—not red or white or blue, but black—be put on the historical table. As far as I was concerned, black history, in the words of that famous industrialist, might be the bunk. Having had no encouragement to think otherwise, through fourteen years of schooling, how was I to have the unusual acumen to perceive that our contributions to history had been neglected? How were we to know that two Negroes were in that boat when George Washington crossed the Delaware, or that whites weren't the *only* abolitionists or that Thomas Jefferson had freed only a few of his slaves and had kept more than a hundred on his plantation? It didn't even seem strange to me to read this sentence in my History 52 senior-year text: "In the years between 1820 and 1869, Americans made it quite clear that theirs was to be an equalitarian and open society."

Recently, a Jewish student from City College in Manhattan said that he would lobby for a Jewish Studies Institute if that college pushed forward with its plans for an Institute of Afro-American Studies. The logical underpinning for his argument is that City is sixty-percent Jewish. I prayed I might find him in the street so I could shout: "What are you afraid of? Don't you realize that Jewish studies have not been neglected, buried or ignored? Did it ever occur to you that we all know more about Abraham's sacrifice than we know about Frederick Douglass' bondage? At least you have a great, living document (placed in every motel in the nation) of your people's history! Why, why are you so afraid of others getting a piece of the action?"

In contradistinction to today's blacks, a piece of the action is what we failed to claim. We weren't thinking of running a candidate for president of Hillel, but just a few aggressive gestures aimed at making our stay on campus more comfortable and less agonizing would have been in order.

But that City College student was appalled at the school's plans to make a separate effort to please its black students.

The most glaring legal example of this separatist posture which has kept minority

groups an arm's length from the American dream is that doctrine enunciated in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. But every university in the country maintains separate admissions standards for different groups. Sons and daughters of alumni and alumnae are almost always given preference over other applicants to colleges. I have been told by a source whose ear is close to the administrative whisperings of my alma mater that one athletic coach reviews the admissions dossier of all jock applicants and *decides* which athletes are to be admitted so they can play for him. One of the few men in my class to be accepted to the Yale Law School insisted that his good fortune was in part related to his having changed his last name so it didn't sound Jewish. Really, universities—being no less American than other institutions—have always used discriminating admissions standards for different groups. Now that some of the more forward-thinking colleges are using guidelines for non-whites instead of against them, the administrations are being accused of unconscionably dispensing preferential treatment.

What would we have done with a substantial number of blacks on campus? Suppose we had been a hundred strong instead of fifteen weak?

I would have not only lobbied for courses in black history, but also for a course in racism which would illustrate how much of discrimination—that overt manifestation of prejudice, which exists in the mind—is gratuitous, unwitting. My comp teacher, for instance, gave me a “C” because I wrote “too much about Negroes.” A fraternity member intercepted my progress across the Wriston Quad one Saturday to invite me to his fraternity's burlesque show. I wrote an “A” paper on Theodore Roethke and the bulk of the professor's comments centered around his opinion that I had outdone myself; or loosely translated, who would have expected a black student to do so well? These incidents, rooted unconsciously on preconceptions, on the peculiar brainwashing of the white set of the mind about the black man's role, had been sampled as far back as high school.

I remember sitting in elementary algebra (in the back, of course) during the first week and hearing the instructor say that the class was too big and one or two would have to be transferred to another section. I was the only black in the class. Naturally, a girl turned to me immediately and asked if I wanted to leave. The same year, I received a “B” in general science during the third or fourth marking period. Why was I exasperated? I had an “A” average that period. Herr Professor changed my grade when I pointed out the discrepancy. He had just assumed I could achieve no better than a “B” average no matter how well I had done. He hadn't even checked my average that term.

Because a course in racism has to put the sociological scalpel in the student's hand so that he may dissect the psychology of the white mind, I would make it mandatory that whites attend these courses. The arguments raised by black students for excluding whites from black-oriented instruction are specious and self-defeating. If it's the white man's sickness that spreads the germ of prejudice, why not *treat* the patient rather than abandon him. And why should black students, if they really feel black is beautiful and white is just all right, be afraid to discuss the reprehensible aspects of black life in front of white people? Confrontation, not separation, is the near-panacea. We should, in the words of

the Reverend Hosea Williams, not be afraid of playing “political psychiatrists” for the sick, racist mind.

I’m not convinced that the instructors of these courses—on racism or black history—have to be black. In all fairness, the criterion should be whether he knows his stuff, whether he can get his stuff together. Even if this selection criterion were not used, it is doubtful that there are enough black scholars to fill the burgeoning demand for their services. Consider: there is a sociology professor at Brown who teaches a course in minority relations. Each year about page 128 in the text, on his lecture about the Negro in America, he becomes increasingly emotional, finally nearing tears, scratching his hair, stomping his feet, whining, “The black man in this country doesn’t have a *chance!*” His performance is probably more effective in urging students to think about the American dilemma than any black professor’s enumeration of civil-rights murders.

But maybe it’s not a bad idea to have a black dormitory and recreation building and a dean of black students—a group of demands recently made by some black students.

My room-mate and I took pleasure in handing out honorary soul-brother cards to gentlemen of Hope College. We taught a couple of them how to slap five, we invited them into our room to dig Ornette and Miles, we even asked them what was happening baby. One white student became so wound up in the beauty of black jargon (his room-mate was a black from Virginia), he would come into our room with, “Hey, man, man, what’s happening, man. Oh, man, man, is it nice out today, man.” He even *bopped*. Well, tried to.

Maybe the black students today can’t take this kind of obsequious appreciation, maybe they feel it’s not their business to teach a white how to be cool or tutor him in Chitlins 100, no more than it’s the white’s responsibility to instruct a black in the difference between a *puncto reverso* and *passado*. “Give us,” say some blacks, “our own building where we can do the Four Corners, listen to Pharoah Sanders, read brother LeRoi and—and just be black.” Fine. But if the purpose of a college education is to afford you the opportunity to find out, why limit your vistas? Similarly, if black is beautiful, let’s exhibit its beauty to the whole world rather than the same old people who see it everyday. It has long been my entrepreneurial proposition that if the Black Muslims would distribute their bean pie in the white market, they would get billions in revenue.

However, I don’t think a black dean would have answered us in the same way a white dean did during one of our first-year meetings with the administration. Somebody complained that we were getting a superior education, but socially we were castrated.

The dean’s answer: “Yes, but remember, there are a lot of white freshmen who are just as unhappy as you.”

The black student didn’t bother to press his argument, but all of us knew what he would have said: “The white student can date anytime he wants with anyone he pleases. The white student has money to go to the movies or a concert. He has friends who rent

off-campus apartments. He has a car. He can afford to bring his girl friend up from Natchez. The white student is white. He belongs here. If he is unhappy, he must be dopey.”

A black dean would have sympathized with us, would have probably gone through the same kinds of traumas when he was an undergraduate, would have at least eased our apprehensions with: “I know how you feel, brother, it’s hell up here in Providence Plantations.” Does our experience corroborate what today’s black students assert—that only a black dean can understand them, empathize, hear them? Does it take a black man to understand basic human emotions such as loneliness, frustration, bewilderment? Or does it just take a human being? Possibly the blacks are suggesting that they haven’t encountered many of these human beings who are white college administrators, and they’d rather take their chances with a black dean than continue the quest for the great white hope.

At graduation, the rumblings among the gentlemen standing around the College Green after commencement were about future plans. What are you going to do in September? What are you going to do in September? What are you doing next year, next year, next year?

The silent understanding among the three of us graduating was that we had better get off campus fast. If anybody learned that all three of us had majored in English lit, they would surely accuse us of collusion for four years, investigate our records, check with our professors, reread our papers and *boom!* No degree. But we made it, two of us going to law school and the third to graduate school in English. We had no grand designs about changing the society, going back to our hometowns to work for a poverty program, or trekking down South to work for some voting-rights campaign. We still had the business of education to consider, of further development of our minds before we entered into our new roles of black Ivy graduate out to reap the full value of that hardwon (and long-endured) degree.

I was the first to tread the boards in this new role—black graduate on stage with a cast of thousands of whites in the spectacle of big business. I left law school to work as a public-relations writer. After three job changes, I am in a better position to comment on the thrust now among black students to major in Afro-American studies and go back and work among their own people.

One should major in anything he wishes, as long as he receives a broad exposure to the essential areas of knowledge. Law schools do not favor certain majors; nor do medical schools. Corporations looking for future vice-presidents are concerned with the man, not the concentration. So it should be remembered that to concentrate means to take a majority of courses in a particular area, not all. One could major in black studies and be exposed to the same number of courses in philosophy, sociology and history as an economics major.

No matter how exasperating the experience may be, I hope some black graduates will

realize that getting a piece of the action requires getting to know the operating procedures of the white corporate structure. If he is to operate his own oil well, he would be better off working for Atlantic Richfield than for a poverty agency. But, as I said, the experience can be unnerving.

Scene: my first week as a public-relations writer for a corporation whose number of employees is about three times larger than the population of my hometown. I have left my jacket in my office, I enter the art department with my shirt and tie. I stand by the doorway until one of the artists ends his conversation. A secretary comes toward me.

“Are you a messenger?” she asks.

Surely, I must be dreaming, I think. I am so flabbergasted, so unprepared, I can only shake my head no. First the campus, then the job.

Through the whole six-month experience with that colossus of a company, it became clear to me that perhaps the black college graduate would do well to join a large corporation if only to perceive the thousands of average and below-average white performers. Perhaps nowhere in America is the myth of the inherent inequality of the black man more susceptible to annihilation than in business.

The depersonalization of the company would keep a sociologist busy for a lifetime. In the directories and on any written material, employees are referred to only by their first two initials and last names. Under no circumstances would John A. Doe be written other than J.A. Doe.

And the exasperation. After my first trip out of town, which resulted in my filing a discrimination suit against an auto-rental company—a suit looked upon by my manager as causing trouble to the company—I was called in by one of my two bosses. He told me to “fix up” the expense voucher because I hadn’t used enough money. If the accounting department noticed that I could spend so little in one day, they might check previous vouchers of executives who had been more prodigal.

Writing was to be by company formula or it wasn’t acceptable. I wrote a dedication speech for the president of the company that began: “I can’t remember when I have been so excited about an opening.” My immediate boss crossed it out, saying the use of the word “opening” was lewd. He was certain people would attach sexual connotations to it.

Sometimes you wondered if anyone was sane. In some introductory remarks for one executive, I used the term Black Tuesday. He removed the allusion because the audience was mixed, and he feared black anger. In a film about a black family that received entrepreneurial assistance from the company, the black girl’s voice was dubbed with the white voice of a company executive’s daughter. The black girl’s voice sounded too “colored.”

So the role continues to be the same, only the setting changes. High school, college, business. In each instance, it is the black man thrust upon the scene, bewildered,

unfamiliar, abashed, like some character from Kafka floundering in his castle. If he comes out shouting, demanding a piece of the action, a part of the American dream which says, yes, you are a member of this society and we shall accord you your equal share—if he attempts to usurp that which patient bargaining has failed to obtain, he is called a radical.

Well, what other appellation would best suit those black students at Cornell with guns? That they were frightened, that they had been threatened were disregarded facts, discarded with the detritus of other relevancies. It was never supposed that they might have had the Birmingham Church bombings in mind; the slain civil-rights volunteers of the early Sixties; the dogs of Bull Connor. These are events that can convince any man he must arm to protect himself. Readers saw that front-page photograph of rifles, breeches open, cartridge chambers empty, and the registering in the minds was automatic: Militants. Radicals. Student Insurrectionists. So, few recognized the real symbol of the event: Fear. And if those students are fearful and mistrustful, is it their paranoia or a true index to the climate surrounding the black student who refuses to be an invisible man on the predominantly white campus that is the cause? Who can blame them for insisting on conditions that will preclude them from having to mouth the opening line of Ginsberg's *America*?

“America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.”

Today’s black student, for the most part, is something else.