

Address to Teachers: An African American Parent's Perspective

by Kimberly Rockwell

Kimberly Rockwell's daughter, Brannon, attends the Mill's College Children's Preschool, a laboratory school designed to give student teachers the opportunity to interact with children in an idealized teaching environment. As part of their training, the teachers attend a weekly seminar on educational-skills building. Kimberly Rockwell was asked to speak to the group of teachers, 90% of whom were Caucasian, as part of their curriculum requirement for anti-biased teaching. Each student was asked to read Peggy McIntosh's article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (see page 23). The following address was delivered to the class of education students who were teaching Brannon and her peers at Mills College in February, 1996.

While considering what I would speak about today — what I would share — it was interesting to me to realize that I was very conscious of reviewing and analyzing the ways some of my experiences or opinions might affect my audience. Would it make you uncomfortable? Would you perceive me as a whiner, unjustifiably leaning on a crutch of racism? But it then occurred to me that I was subjecting myself to what I call my "Acceptability Scanner," designed to make myself more acceptable and less threatening as a person of color in a White context. That scanner is familiar; I walked through it every morning on the way to my job as an investment analyst for a large real estate corporation, where I was the only African American and one of three people of color in a firm of over 150 employees.

Considering what I would speak about today, I was overcome by a tsunami of recollections, and had to remind myself repeatedly that I only had five or so minutes to speak. Exactly what did I want to share? Could I comfortably, unemotionally, relate how my counselor at the private high school I attended had lied to me for two years, telling me that I need only pass Math 1 to gain entrance into UCLA or USC, only to discover at the end of my sophomore year, after sending away for materials myself, that most colleges wouldn't even look at my application without algebra, geometry, trigonometry and calculus? When I asked the counselor, a nun, why she hadn't told me the truth, she said she didn't believe I could get in anyway and she didn't want to get my hopes up. I was a B student, yet she had told me this lie all the time from our first meeting in my freshman year until our last meeting at the end of my sophomore year. I later discovered that I wasn't alone; other Black students had had similar or virtually identical experiences with this counselor. Although some

Blacks counseled by this woman were put on the college track, they were the daughters of doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, with parents knowledgeable about college requirements and the demands of a college prep program. My parents, on the other hand, relied on the fact that they were paying tuition to a private college prep high school whose instructors and administrators would guide their daughters' futures. Could I share this part of my life with you, I asked myself, without tearing up at the memory still so vivid and painful?

I decided to read the article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," to see if a format suggested itself. One did. I read the list of 26 conditions of privilege and decided to create my own list. I hope it provides you with another perspective and perhaps an opportunity to increase your sensitivity to the complex issues of guiding and helping to mold the lives of young people.

I've titled my list, "Pet Peeves; or Experiences I've Had Which I'm Saddened to Consider My Four-Year-Old Daughter Will Also Likely Experience as a Person of Color in This Society." All of these incidents have occurred to me in either academic or work environments. It angers me:

1. that books and magazines by and about people of color are treated as specialty items. For example, I can't buy a national magazine like *Essence* in my neighborhood in Berkeley at either the local bookstore or at the pharmacy newsstand;
2. to be told that I speak "so well" when White colleagues are not so complimented even though our verbal presentation is the same;
3. to be "complimented" by being told that I don't sound Black. Do all African Americans speak the same? Do all Whites? Of course not;
4. to be told by a college professor at our first in-person encounter, a professor who had previously read and graded my papers and spoken to me on the telephone, that I didn't "present as Black";
5. to be asked, "How do you comb your hair?" or be told "Wow, it's so soft!" when someone assumes that it's perfectly okay to touch my hair without asking. On one

occasion, a White colleague walked into my office and, while waiting for a report, reached out, touched my hair and asked, "Is this a weave?" She said she'd never seen a Black woman with naturally long hair. I was dumbfounded.

6. to be asked by Caucasians what I'm "mixed with." When I was a young girl I was a little surprised by the question, because I saw myself as very clearly African American, but proudly answered that I also have Native American blood. The resulting reactions ranged from "Oh, then you're not really Black," to "That explains it."
7. to be asked if my daughter, whose skin is lighter than my own, is mine; whether I am her real mother. The first time I was asked this question was while limping from a Cesarean birth, with an abdomen still much swollen from pregnancy.

My hopes and goals for my daughter's education are she see people of color that — consistently, not intermittently — as role models, as teachers and administrators. I want her not to be the only person of color, or one of only a few, in her classrooms. I don't want my daughter told, as I was on more than one occasion, that "I don't see you as a person of color; I just see you as my friend/classmate/colleague." This color-blindness invalidates her identity and life experiences. I want her and all her classmates to have teachers and academic settings which actively, rather than passively, teach about and present as many different cultures and experiences as possible in a manner which instills pride in her history and heritage and respect for, and appreciation of, realities different from her own. It is my mission as a parent to work toward these goals. I also dream these things for myself.