

THE NEW RACISM: The Remedy Is Black Education — of Whites!

By Clarence Amann
(The second of two parts)

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A new white consciousness and conscience must be formed if the just aspirations of blacks to "equal opportunity" are to be realized.

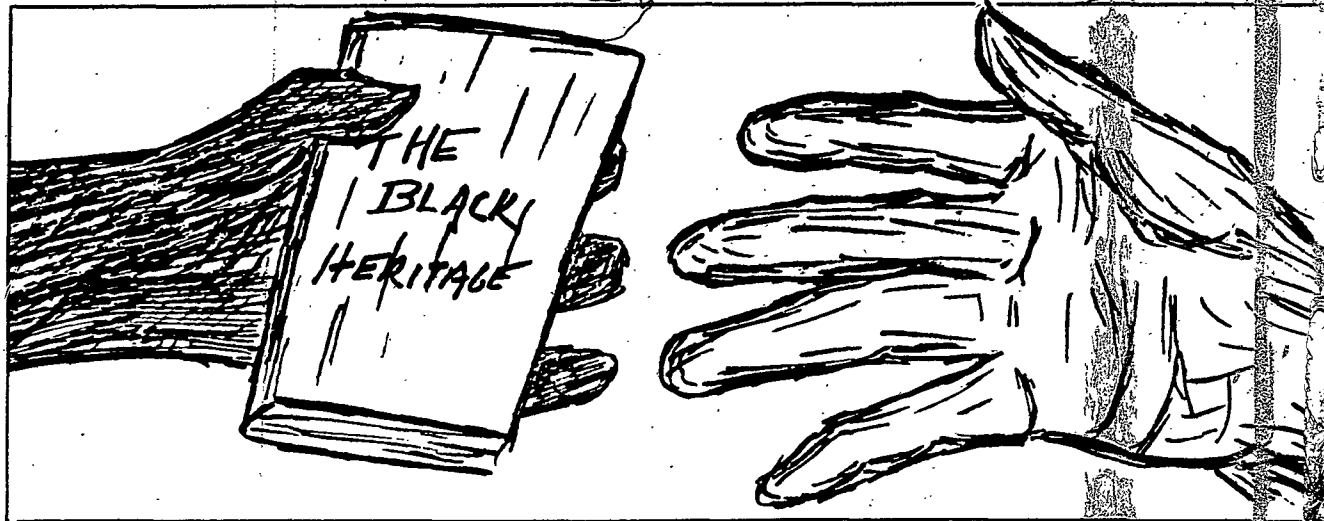
These rights must be institutionalized, as American guarantees, donees, accepted, unquestioned, rather than viewed as exceptional "grants" to be fought for with demonstrations and emergency tactics every few years. Without such a depth of understanding by whites of the black consciousness and its evolution, racism must inevitably continue to be the response of the general populus of whites reared in America, however "well-meaning" they may be.

Practically speaking, this means every white must accept his present unawareness as a challenge to reeducate himself in this vital area. To understand the mind of blackfolk in America, and the scarring injustices worked on that mind, calls for a study of history, history, as blacks have experienced and told it. It means reading John Hope Franklin and not Henry Steele Commager. It means reading the first-person accounts of slave narratives, and of the pride Virginia took in its pre-eminence among the colonies in slave-breeding, an industry so vital to America's cotton culture in the mid 1800s.

That is a beginning. It means a continuing education to the destructiveness of discrimination in all its dehumanizing forms and effects over the centuries; this author believes this is best accomplished by whites through the reading of a wide variety of works by black authors, writers freed from the threats and consequent inhibition they've experienced in face-to-face confrontation, who therefore "tell it like it was and is," as blacks experience it, not as white authors have felt blacks should view it. It means, further, reading the well-crafted documentaries of Booker Washington and William DuBois, the ardent speeches of Frederick Douglass, the virulent poetry of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), poetry that "intensified the gentler protests of little heralded but very serious early poets, such as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer. It means reading the important and persuasive critical fiction of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, and later social iconoclasts like James Baldwin, John Williams, James McPherson, Lorraine Hansberry and Ernest Gaines, to list a few of the many articulate black artists whose genius with the written word enables them to bring whites as close as possible to an impossible identification with the lot of blacks. It means graduating in such study to readable tracts in sociology by E. Franklin Frazer ("The Negro Family America") and Kenneth Clark ("Dark Ghetto"). It means reading the penetrating psychological observations of the black psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs ("Black Rage") and applying these to the bitter and incisive polemic of the most "vulgar" spokesmen of the 60s and early 70s, erstwhile insurrectionists like Rap Brown and Eldridge Cleaver, and to the desperate justifications of defensive violence of the Black Panthers and the "devil-white" logic of the early Black Muslims. It means meditating on the deceptively simplistic theology of passive protest of Martin Luther King, and the more forceful liberation theology of James Cone. It means reading at least as many of these authors and their more contemporary counterparts as will bring the concerned white conscience to a recognition of the complexity of the challenge, a new patience with grudgingly acknowledged white ignorance, as well as the challenge to learn how little of the black consciousness has been truly understood by whites.

It has been the observation of this white teacher of black literature that whites are more in need of black studies in the schools than are blacks. Our "superior" lot, in practical terms, makes us whites morally responsible for our own education to the fullness of understanding of what it has meant and what it still means to be black in America. It will not come from "living next to one," or even from "working with one," nor finally even from more intimate associations in projects, organizations, even in conjugal or familial relationships, however helpful these may be. Study, and preferably, ordered, structured study is the surest and most rapid means of accomplishing this new understanding.

Our good, even our best white schools are still failing at this task. Sadly, we have found it necessary to



exaggerate the "generally humanizing" virtues of the traditional liberal arts classical studies; this, in order to meet the threatening emphasis on more "material and pragmatic" disciplines that will insure for the student "a good, paying job" and a "comfortable life style." The concept of humanizing study must turn in our land, and now, to a concentration on the too long misinterpreted mentality and culture that identifies more than a tenth of our nation's population. Black studies for whites should be a priority in the schools today, especially in those colleges where a respectful emphasis is put upon the humanities and liberal arts studies. It is not inconceivable that this new focus in the humanities upon black esthetics in all disciplines might indeed bring new life to traditional humanities programs dying for lack of vitality and utility.

I find it unconscionable that education departments in predominantly white colleges and universities are still sending white teachers into the modern urban scene around the country without the salutary arsenal of knowledge needed to confront city black students! The central urban schools record yearly higher percentages of minority students; our own city of Rochester has long since reported a population of more than 50 percent black in the inner-city school system. I deplore the failure of colleges to equip these teachers, largely white, with solid courses in black history and black literature at mature levels, let alone more focused training in black psychology and sociology. Is it any wonder that white teachers find it difficult "to cope," and thus defect in discouragement? Even where exceptional teacher dedication and stability allow their perseverance, much that is destructive is visited upon student and teacher alike by reason of the misconceptions that might easily have been precluded by such solid black studies courses.

This instructor will attest that it is a satisfying experience to teach a college class the literature of black American writers, and through the literature the substantial sinew of black history and culture. Over the course of even one semester, dramatic changes take place in the attitudes of white students whose minds have been opened to this probing. Minimally, the earnest white student learns humility in recognizing the vast canon of material, thoroughly of the American experience, of which he has long been unaware. More vitally, he learns much that had never occurred to him about the experience and consciousness of his "darker brother." This learning process will not happen spontaneously or overnight; it will take solid root, however, over the course of a semester or two of deliberately planned and faithfully executed study.

Only when formal programs are instituted and implemented and attitudes are thus changed through understanding, study and realization, will there be the kind of immediate and summary rejection of Klan activity, and a substantial reduction in the acts of demented white violence visited upon black citizens, and this without panicky recourse to demonstrations and counter violent activities. And the rejection will be immediate because racism will then be recognized wherever it presents itself, and however subtly concealed in the best American institutions, and in the best Americans. Until then, there will be, regrettably, a call for ill-designed, unenforceable legislation, superficial band-aids applied to surface sores while the causative cancer spreads and complicates itself within.

It should be insisted, finally, that there are practical means by which individuals can educate themselves outside the structure of classrooms. The uses of discussion, conferences, workshops, symposia and other semi-formal means are of important value, though limited. These are of special value to those of us who are of the "older generation," beyond the reach of the formal classroom. They tend to focus on the surface, the immediate, on the dramatic and the temporary. All of the latter flaws must be eliminated

by a long-range universality of understanding. Classroom study by students at all levels is the imperative experience as blacks themselves have known it — and this to be accomplished primarily through our reading of their written word — is the best guarantee of genuine understanding. One cannot overemphasize the severe moral imperative this urges upon school administrators and all teachers in all disciplines.

If we fail in this, we become liable to the judgement implicit in this bit of dark prophecy:

When you have succeeded in dehumanizing the Negro: when you have put him down and made it impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the field, when you have extinguished his soul in this world and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out as in the darkness of the damned, are you quite sure that demon you have aroused will not turn and rend you?

No less pertinent now than it was in the fifties and sixties of our century, this is not the voice of a modern black revolutionary. It is the voice and warning of Abraham Lincoln, echoing from almost a century and a half ago. The choice implicit in Lincoln's question has not yet been made: the statistics on rising black unemployment and poverty stand to witness it. It behooves us to make that choice while there is still time.

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