

This essay, first published in the New York Times (13 August 1990) as an Op-Ed essay and then re-written for Ebony, was much embraced by many hard-working and law-abiding blacks who often found themselves the object of unwarranted suspicions merely on account of being black. An unwarranted statistical generalization privileges skin color above all other salient details. In the essay, I was much concerned to show the deep, deep injustice of such statistical generalizations, although I did not use that language in the essay.

-- Laurence Thomas, 27 July 2009

News Publications

'In my next life, I'll be White.' - column

Ebony, Dec, 1990 by Laurence Thomas

IN my next life, I shall certainly aim to come back a White person-make that a White male.

While White males have committed more evil cumulatively than any other class of people in the world, this fact is often lost on both them and others. The Crusades, American slavery and two world wars, including the Holocaust, should clinch this point.

When it comes to evil on a grand scale, Black men can't hold a candle to White men. Yet, White people have turned being fearful of Blacks-especially Black males-into such an art form that if I didn't know any better, I would be afraid of Black men myself

My 40-year journey through life has revealed to me that more often than not, I need only be in the presence of a White woman and she will begin clutching her pocketbook. I think of myself as pretty quick, but I am no match for the response time it takes for Whites to lock their car doors should they spot a Black male. At times, I have looked over my shoulder expecting to see the danger to which a White was reacting, only to have it dawn on me that I was the menace.

Black men rarely enjoy what is properly called the public trust of Whites, no matter how much their deportment or attire conform to the traditional standards of well-off White males. To enjoy the public trust is to have strangers regard one as a morally decent person in a variety of contexts.

We associate various forms of behavior, attire and physical grooming with being a morally decent person. Yet, a Black man could just as well be dressed in black-tie and be a graduate of the Vanderbilt School of Etiquette (if there were such a place), and Whites would still knock themselves out locking their car doors or clutching their purses.

Nothing of the sort is true for White males-although White males are far from having a pristine record on the moral front. Still, a suit and tie suffice to make a White male respectable.

I have noticed that this fear of Black men goes way beyond the pale of rationality. I was recently walking down a supermarket aisle with two hand-baskets full of groceries, one in each hand. A White woman saw me and rushed for her pocketbook, which she had left in her cart. I would have had to put my own groceries down in order to take her pocketbook. No doubt she thought to herself. "He won't fool me with that old basket-in-each-hand trick."

Similarly, it would not occur to anyone to think that a 6-foot-tall, 150-pound well-groomed White male in traditional academic attire-tweed jacket and tie-with briefcase in hand was actually seeking to break into a university office simply because he was reading a bulletin board outside of the conference hall. Yet not long ago, when I was in just such a situation at a

Midwestern university, four campus police officers were summoned to investigate. What on earth was I reported as -10-feet tall in military garb? Or, did someone say, "There's a Black man..."? Now when was the last time that a headline read: "A group of roving Black males in tweed jackets and ties attacked a White person"?

Even abroad, White American women have responded to my presence by leaping for their pocketbooks. In the Middle East recently, I simply had to say to one woman who did such a thing, "Do you really think that I traveled nearly 6,000 miles in order to steal your purse when it is obvious that you are not much better off than I am, since we're staying in the same hotel?"

Many of my well-placed Black friends report similar mind-boggling stories. Now if we, well-groomed and mannered Blacks, do not enjoy the public trust, it is discomfiting to think how less well-off Blacks fare.

Surely Whites are wrong in thinking that the high crime rate among Black males justifies their being suspicious of all Black males. It is not racism to be wary of a man who might very well pose some sort of threat. It is racism, however, to treat all Blacks as if they are a threat-just because they are Black and just because there are some Blacks who are threats.

Now there is nothing trivial about enjoying the public trust, for to do so is to bask in the recognition that others expect one to live morally. And this recognition is part and parcel of how each and every person comes to take her- or himself seriously as a responsible moral being.

On the other hand, when-as with Blacks-an entire people are denied the public trust, the result is a very deep psychic scar of relentless moral disconfirmation. Every Black has this scar. It is simply that Blacks differ in their resources to cope with it. The successful Black whose attention is riveted from his supermarket shopping by the White who unsubtly reveals her suspicion of him has the emotional salve of good fortune to ease the pain of this scar which has been freshly pricked yet again.

But some have no emotional salve. Thus the sear of distrust festers and becomes the fountainhead of low self-esteem and self-hate. Indeed, to paraphrase the venerable Apostle Paul, those who would do right find that they cannot. This should come as no surprise, however. For it is rare for anyone to live morally without the right sort of moral and social affirmation. And to ask this of Blacks is to ask what is very nearly psychologically impossible.