

## William Raspberry

William Raspberry (b. 1936) is a journalist and syndicated columnist who wrote for over forty years for *The Washington Post*. He was born in Okolona, Mississippi, and left his small segregated town to begin reporting, covering major events and writing stories on education, race, social justice, and crime. In 1994, he won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary. He taught at Duke University, where he held the Knight Chair in Communication and Journalism. Raspberry retired in 2005. This essay first appeared in his syndicated column in 1982.

### The Handicap of Definition

I know all about bad schools, mean politicians, economic deprivation and racism. Still, it occurs to me that one of the heaviest burdens black Americans—and black children in particular—have to bear is the handicap of definition: the question of what it means to be black.

Let me explain quickly what I mean. If a basketball fan says that the Boston Celtics' Larry Bird<sup>o</sup> plays "black," the fan intends it—and Bird probably accepts it—as a compli-

ment. Tell pop singer Tom Jones<sup>o</sup> he moves "black" and he might grin in appreciation. Say to Teena Marie<sup>o</sup> or The Average White Band<sup>o</sup> that they sound "black" and they'll thank you.

But name one pursuit, aside from athletics, entertainment or sexual performance in which a white practitioner will feel complimented to be told he does it "black." Tell a white broadcaster he talks "black," and he'll sign up for diction lessons.

Tell a white reporter he writes "black" and he'll take a writing course. Tell a white lawyer he reasons "black" and he might sue you for slander.

What we have here is a tragically limited definition of blackness, and it isn't only white people who buy it.

Think of all the ways black children can put one another down with charges of "whiteness." For many of these children, hard study and hard work are "white." Trying to please a teacher might be criticized as acting "white." Speaking correct English is "white." Scrimping today in the interest of tomorrow's goals is "white." Educational toys and games are "white."

An incredible array of habits and attitudes that are conducive to success in business, in academia, in the nonentertainment professions are likely to be thought of as somehow "white." Even economic success, unless it involves such "black" undertakings as numbers banking, is defined as "white."

And the results are devastating. I wouldn't deny that blacks often are better entertainers and athletes. My point is the harm that comes from too narrow a definition of what is black.

One reason black youngsters tend to do better at basketball, for instance,

is that they assume they can learn to do it well, and so they practice constantly to prove themselves right.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could infect black children with the notion that excellence in math is "black" rather than white, or possibly Chinese? Wouldn't it be of enormous value if we could create the myth that morality, strong families, determination, courage and love of learning are traits brought by slaves from Mother Africa and therefore quintessentially<sup>o</sup> black?

There is no doubt in my mind that most black youngsters could develop their mathematical reasoning, their elocution<sup>o</sup> and their attitudes the way they develop their jump shots and their dance steps: by the combination of sustained, enthusiastic practice and the unquestioned belief that they can do it.

In one sense, what I am talking about is the importance of developing positive ethnic traditions. Maybe Jews have an innate talent for communication; maybe Chinese are born with a gift for mathematical reasoning; maybe blacks are naturally blessed with athletic grace. I doubt it. What is at work, I suspect, is assumption, inculcated early in their lives, that this is a thing our people do well.

*Larry Bird*: (b. 1956), star forward for the Boston Celtics (1979–1992)

*Tom Jones*: (b. 1940), Welsh pop singer

*Teena Marie*: (1956–2010), white American R&B and disco singer

*The Average White Band*: Scottish R&B and funk band of the 1970s

*quintessentially*: most typically

*elocution*: the art of public speaking

Unfortunately, many of the things about which blacks make this assumption are things that do not contribute to their career success—except for that handful of the truly gifted who can make it as entertainers and athletes. And many of the things we concede to whites are the things that are essential to economic security.

So it is with a number of assumptions black youngsters make about what it is to be a "man": physical aggressiveness, sexual prowess, the refusal to submit to authority. The prisons are full of people who, by this perverted definition, are unmistakably men.

But the real problem is not so much that the things defined as "black" are negative. The problem is that the definition is much too narrow.

Somehow, we have to make our children understand that they are intelligent, competent people, capable of doing whatever they put their minds to and making it in the American mainstream, not just in a black subculture.

What we seem to be doing, instead, is raising up yet another generation of young blacks who will be failures by definition.

[1982]