

From Old-heads to Young-bloods*

Advice from Black men to those who will be

By Regie Gibson

Hey there, Black boy...

I just wanna talk to you. Let you know I understand the things that you're goin' through. See, I was a Black boy. I grew up in this country, too. Now, I've got grey hair. Yeah, I learned a thing or two: Like, how not to get eaten even though you're in the lion's mouth. Like, how to not get taken when they try and take you out. How to beat a system bent on beatin' up your life. How to not get sniped. How to dance in the rifle sights.

You see, there are red dots aimed at your head, kid. Why? Well, when you were born that's the first thing they messed with. And they'll just keep comin' at you to attack and hack your mental until it's lentil sized—brutalized by lies of your potential. I know you can hear it. Vague and atmospheric—those messages tellin' you *you won't be nothin' but some kinda thug, son—poverty and prison's gonna be your only options*. I know you can feel how hard they make it for you to get educated...so, you stay underfed and underrated until you become a fist that's fated to end up incarcerated.

See, that's the game. And there just ain't enough of us around givin' you the skinny on how this biz is goin' down. Admittedly, too many old-heads like me have stepped to step you as if we're your rivals. But, lately, I've grown deathly concerned with your survival- 'cuz I know that, for the grace of older heads lookin' out for me...I wouldn't be here to tell any of you young-bloods anything. So, I just ask that you listen to what I've come to say. Take the best of what makes sense to you and throw the rest of it away.

First, get the dictionary—wrestle with those words—and, learn to use your oppressors language even better than they can. Why? 'Cuz in the language lies all your oppressor's truths and lies. And learnin' how they twist them together might better help you to survive.

Then, practice 4 distinct categories of speech: One for the courthouse— one for the streets. One for the classroom— one for your peeps. And know folks in authority are gonna judge you by the way that you speak. They'll judge how often you swear. Judge the cut of your hair. How you slouch in your chair. Judge how often they scare: of the color we share. Of the truth you declare. Of the swagger you dare. The bling and clothes that you wear.

So, refuse to wear any brand name across your chest (unless that brand has done somethin' for this world that's worthy of respect). 'Cuz, to present your body branded with somebody else name is the very essence of what it was to have been enslaved! Go get a hand drum and get to drummin', son. Why? Because the drum is what the oppressors took away from your ancestors to separate them from Africa, and make them act more Western— and keep them

from communicating messages of freedom and escapin'. And, like me, when you drum you might find that when you close your eyes and your hands strike skin and **boom bap!** You get just a little bit of Africa back.

You need to know that the reality of bein' a man who is black means that 4 of your heads bobbin' inside of 1 car eventually equals 1 pullover by 2 racist cops (especially when you've got 1 hiphop album on blast. Yeah, it's racist arithmetics but you'd better learn this math). And when you get pulled over... and you will— remain still and keep both your hands visible. And when they try to enrage you... and they will— remain chill, cool, calm and sensible. And, know some of your friends who ain't black like you may never understand what it is you're goin' through. And, some others won't give a damn what it is you're goin' through. So, you must be careful which white folks you let know what's killin' you.

See, too many see everything as a zero/sum game— and gain a sick sense of superiority in *their* profit and *your* loss— and would rather see you grope without hope than pay what equality of opportunity costs. Some would rather see you hurtin' than as a full person. And, if you die in destitution or from— **clap! clap! clap!** bein' shot by cop... some'll just justify it...rationalize it...so they can say you deserved it.

And not just some white people, but even some who are white adjacent. You'll find this same attitude among some immigrants, some Latinx, some Indians, some Asians who've accepted that seekin' their American dream means learnin' to snore through your historic American screams. That acknowledgin' them might compromise their achievin' things. Keep them from receivin' things they're told are worth havin'— like a chance at grabbin' that American brass ring. So, to prove who they're loyal to some'll do almost anything: Like lend their voices to the racist chorus and sing. Like look at your head— pick up a stone...weigh its weight...and then fling. Increasin' your historic pain and unearned sufferin'. Ignorin' how much of your physical and mental maimin' and murder it brings. This is the truth, kid.

Yet, in spite of it— when you go through life you absolutely must give everyone you first meet complete respect... but no trust.

Respect is somethin' you give anyone whose breathin'. Trust you reserve until there is a good reason. And if there isn't one— leave them alone, son. Never be afraid to remain on your own, son. And no matter how much pressure this world puts on, son there is somethin' to that cliché about how pressure creates diamonds. And, though you've got your flaws you keep shinin'. Dig deep down for your gifts— challenge yourself, and others, and you'll find them. And in whatever you choose to pursue strive to be excellent. For while this world plows a path that allows for the worst of white males to become President... it makes absolutely no place for mediocre Black men.

And sometimes you're gonna flail and feel like cryin'. Sometimes you're gonna fail, wanna lay down and begin dyin'. And when that happens, remember what the Mother said to her son: Life ain't no crystal stair...but you gotta keep on climbin'.**

You fight back twice as hard! Duck and dodge— keep up your guard! Keep a lifted voice— a lifted vision and a compassionate heart. Take every opportunity to learn, listen, study and grow not just book smart— but life wise. Black boy, rise and sing in the dead of night. Take those broken wings you've got and learn to take flight. Take those tear-sunken eyes of yours and learn to see.*** Know how much was given for you to be free.

Know you are the result of your ancestors sacrificin' and bleedin'! Though you will never know their faces— know you are what they prayed for— the answer to their pleadin'!

Keep growin', keep learnin', keep your mind turnin', keep your fire burnin'— keep believin'!

You wanna beat the game Black boy? *Keep breathin'...keep breathin'...keep breathin'...*

* Gathered from conversations with Black men with and without sons, who wanted to pass on advice to Black boys coming of age in America.

** A paraphrased passage taken from the poem "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes

*** This passage is a variation of a lyric from the song "Black Bird" by Sir Paul McCartney