

The Necessity of Excellence

I. Nairobi College

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When I was asked by the editors of Change to take a journey through the provinces of black higher education, I was elated and at the same time full of trepidation. It was something that I very much wanted to do, because after having spent a lifetime in white schools and knowing something about white incompetence, I do not easily brook loose talk about black inferiority. And that is what we expect to hear about when we touch upon any black institution that has survived in this country. Moreover, it has always seemed to me to be an example of quintessential gall for whites to look at the faces of blacks, scarred by their passage in this land, and then to wonder why the marks are still so visible.

I believe that racism will long endure among this country's institutions and people and that blacks ought to cultivate a sturdy self-confidence in the face of a system that bobs and weaves but does not greatly change. This self-confidence—hard enough for the children of the rulers of the world to marshal—is sometimes completely absent in the lives of many blacks. But education may be one way to get at it, even though the clarions of racism will continue to sound and try to deafen us to our possibilities. I hope at the end of this series to have provided some tentative answers to three rather simple questions: Where are we now in the higher education of blacks? Where do we want to go? And how do we get there?

The winter sun is shining in East Palo Alto, California, as we gather for an all-college meeting of Nairobi College in the green and pink gymnasium of the Garden Oaks School. The hall fills slowly. Mothers bring their children while young boys play basketball near the six poles that surround the pink folding chairs. There is a temporary library to the left of the stage, and in the kitchen teachers are preparing punch and unpacking cookies. Many of the young women wear turbans and long skirts and some of the men have braided their hair. Everyone in the hall is black.

Suddenly noises, heads turning. A scattering of

applause and Stokely Carmichael, dark glasses on his handsome face, comes through the door with some local friends. He had spoken the night before at a neighborhood high school and had stressed the importance of black people remembering and venerating the continent of Africa. He had wondered how many black Americans think about the possibility of dual citizenship and had calmly urged his listeners to work toward black unity. Now, some sixteen hours later, he tries to be unobtrusive among his natural constituency—the young, black and educated poor. Much later he will be introduced, will rise in silence to bow to the crowd of some two hundred persons and then will slip silently through the door.

Finally the program begins. The mistress of ceremonies is listed as Sister Denise Armstrong, and

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Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has
taught us;
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has
brought us;

Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

The moment of catharsis over, Sister Armstrong now leads the assembly in repeating the Nairobi College Code: The Seven Principles of Blackness.

Umoja (unity)—To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race.

Kujichagulia (self-determination)—To define, name, create for and speak for ourselves.

Ujima (collective work and responsibility)—To build and maintain our community together, to make our Brother's problems ours and solve them together.

Ujamaa (cooperative economics)—To build and maintain our own businesses and to profit together from them.

Nia (purpose)—To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community, to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

Kuumba (creativity)—To do as much as we can, in the way we can, to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

Imani (faith)—To believe with all our heart in our people and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

The program that follows includes the introduction of the faculty and staff by Donald Smothers, president of Nairobi College and a series of takeoffs on the mores of some of the college's students who have not yet learned to be punctual and who, in spite of their newly assumed African names, continue to evince ghetto traits. It is all done in a mock-serious style, and it takes some time for a visitor to the monthly meetings to realize that what these students and teachers have in mind is nothing less than the creation within the confines of East Palo Alto of a new kind of black person.

The presumptuousness of Nairobi College in undertaking that particular task is apparent when one confronts the college's history and its present tenuous position. But a true believer doubts neither the worthiness of Smothers's cause nor his ability to work minor miracles, and the people at Nairobi are believers.

This college was created out of the flames, fire bombs and police batons that appeared at the College of San Mateo in California, a junior college that had brought in a young, tall and intense black man named Bob Hoover to recruit minority students for its fortresslike campus. Allegations of racial discrimination, broken promises and insensitivity began almost at once. Then vandalism



she asks everyone to stand and sing the black national anthem. It is "Lift Every Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson, and it has replaced "The Star Spangled Banner" at many black meetings with any pretense to nationalism. As the young pianist strikes the first note, over two hundred voices rise to carry the words out of the auditorium and into the steady but hopeful ghetto of East Palo Alto:

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven
ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling seas.

and riots. Then policemen wielding batons took up command positions on the grounds of the campus. After some black students were jailed and Bob Hoover fired, many students quit in protest.

Now four years later in a white and green bungalow in a middle-class section of East Palo Alto, I look at Bob Hoover, ex-president of Nairobi College, and ask if his announcement in 1969 that he was going to start a college wasn't honed more in desperation than in reality. He tries to suppress a smile, his brow furrows, and then he looks at his wife Mary, dressed in a red sweater, red trousers and black boots. She had told me earlier that day: "Nairobi College is my life now. This is where I want to show that in passing through this world I did my bit for my people." And he tells me: "I was coerced into starting this college, really. The students leaned on a group of us to do it. You see, at the College of San Mateo we had a kind of unity among black, Chicano and Asian students that I have never seen elsewhere. The administration got frightened because we were able to recruit and hold so many students. Before we got to that college, there were about seventy-five black kids enrolled and you couldn't find the Chicanos. Nine out of every ten black students who went to the College of San Mateo left at the end of the second semester. By the time the program was destroyed, we were retaining about 80 percent of our students. In two years we sent over fifty students on to four-year colleges and not one flunked out. We were able to do this because we made damn sure that the students understood not only the value of their education but the value of that education to their respective communities. Put in simple language and repeated over and over again, only a fool could fail to see his or her human worth. We had this incredible success, and by the time I was fired, we had over five hundred students in our program. A new president had been hired by the college over the summer, and in an attempt to control us, he cut our budget requests. After he did that, the riots started. Then a group of young black students said to us: 'Let's try to get our own thing going. We don't want to be associated with Stanford. We want to build an institution that has meaning for us. We want to use our own sweat.' When young students tell you that, there is really nothing else to do but to help them accomplish their goals."

It sounds so easy, as if Nairobi College were created only through an act of will. But that is just what happened: faith, will and \$70,000 got them through the first year. Ten thousand dollars came from the Field Foundation, another \$10,000 from donations and anonymous gifts and \$50,000 from the mother of a white student who, as a tutor at the College of San Mateo, was so impressed with Bob Hoover that she prevailed upon her mother to

contribute to the new college without walls. Mary Hoover remembers that period: "Ten-thousand-dollar checks would arrive in little personalized envelopes from this marvelous woman. Nothing flashy and no special delivery." Only two persons were paid on a full-time basis that year. Six students worked in the office, and Bob Hoover took one student "who never had a checking account in her life" and put her in charge of the books. "They are still trying to straighten out those books from the first year," he says, his laughter shaking the paneled walls of his study.

Nairobi College survived its first year after the blacks of East Palo Alto began to see that men who had degrees and who were teachers were not too proud to empty garbage cans and sweep up the debris left by students in meeting places across the community. They began to take more than a passing interest in the college. Bob Hoover explains how this came about: "It was necessary for us to think of ourselves as a college in the service of the community. In the first place we couldn't afford a physical plant and in the second place we didn't want one. We felt that if we could meet regularly in churches or in homes, people would begin to take us seriously. We are such an accepted part of the community now that we hold some of our classes at the local branch of the Bank of America and nobody thinks anything about that."

The "community" Hoover speaks about is unincorporated and under the jurisdiction of San Mateo County, the nation's second richest. According to the *Community Handbook*, which was compiled and edited by the League of Women Voters of South San Mateo County, this area is "located at the southerly end of San Francisco Peninsula's populous bayside...in a warm, pleasant climate with fertile, level land. The Bay lies to the east, industrial sections and the Belle Haven area of Menlo Park to the north, and the Willows section of Menlo Park to the west." The handbook does not say that the unemployment rate of East Palo Alto is twice the national average. It does not say that the transportation system is terrible, that when it rains many of the poorly lit and unpaved streets are flooded and one is forced to walk ankle-deep in mud. This unwanted appendage to the San Mateo body of riches is also without political power. The handbook states that "the Municipal Council of East Palo Alto [was] created by resolution of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors in 1966 [and] is the official voice of East Palo Alto." But further along it says that "the council has a full-time staff *assigned to it by the County Board of Supervisors.*" (Italics mine.) Now one begins to understand why many young

blacks regard the council as a futile exercise to bring about change while others see it as another example of the grudging tokenism of white power brokers who try to co-opt or ignore what they can no longer control. At any rate, the statistics, when juxtaposed to those of San Mateo County, are cause for alarm. Just over half the adults here have had a high school education. Over 65 percent of the population is under twenty-five; drug abuse has become widespread, and in the last five years Bob Hoover has seen a trend that spells danger to him: "Over seventy-five houses have been abandoned by middle-class families. The erosion of the street is beginning to take its toll. Black mothers have begun to get frightened for their children and so they have pulled up stakes and moved to another town. The houses here are then reclaimed by the FHA or whoever holds the mortgage, or they become temporary homes for junkies. This means that we are beginning to see the breakdown of the community. We have got to reverse that trend. We have got to convince middle-class, professional blacks that their fight is here. Once we do this we can slow down the spread of blight that affects all low-income black communities that have only one economic and professional class. And it is in this respect that Nairobi College becomes even more important, for it can be a focus around which we can all gather. No one can argue about the necessity of providing better education for black people, and with all the talent for leadership in East Palo Alto we can make sure that the college acts as an impetus to bring back those blacks who have run from the deterioration of their former community."

I listen to his optimistic words and ask if man's prime responsibility is not to his family, and I wonder aloud if his words are not really an attempt at grandstanding since no one can ask a man to return to any community where he must fear for his family each time they venture out of doors. Hoover becomes serious, sighs deeply and then says: "I see us on a march with time in this community. In many others—Harlem, for example—there isn't much that can be done, but here in East Palo Alto, we can turn the tide if we act now. You see, I think there are many communities like this one in the country; and if talented blacks are serious about our future, they will find those areas, move in and begin to do the hard work of changing them. Here we can stop the erosion because it hasn't settled in very deeply and it's unlike many of our Eastern cities where people just prey upon each other to survive. That is why the example we set at Nairobi is so important."

It does not take a visitor long to understand that most of the people connected with Nairobi College regard East Palo Alto as the community which must ultimately be the recipient of their skills. As Bob Hoover puts it: "If in ten years we graduate

two hundred people who go on to four-year colleges and then bring back their expertise to East Palo Alto, I will consider our 'experiment' a success." And Moriba, co-president of the student body, echoing Hoover says: "All my life I have wanted to be of some service to my brothers and sisters. It was not until I came to Nairobi that I learned how I could do this systematically."

At first all these statements seem like so much posturing and one is convinced that as the week goes by, one will pierce the thin facade and discover beneath not even a semblance of commitment to the ideas espoused. And so, stumbling into an early-morning staff meeting in the only recognizable building that is run by Nairobi College, I wait to see the defenses breached.

The administrative building on Donohoe Street is a rather nondescript structure built from cement blocks. There are green and white tiles on the floor, and the makeshift offices are partitioned with plywood. When discussions or arguments occur, neighbors are privy to everything because the cubicles called offices are barely over six feet high. This morning's meeting comes to order. There are ten teaching and counseling personnel in the room, and the prime reason for the meeting is to discuss the establishment of the James Winder Scholarship Fund. Winder, director of academic affairs for the college, was killed in an automobile accident on December 1, 1972, and this is Nairobi's way of remembering him. The brochure that announces the fund states that Winder viewed "black youth as a community resource and believed that to the degree that our youth develop their potential as human resources through education and the acquisition of much needed skills, the community directly benefits and the quality of its life improves." Any recipient of the James Winder Scholarship Award must "at all times comply with the Nairobi Code and Philosophy, must satisfy community service requirements" and must "make a direct contribution to the development of the College by active involvement in the Student Council or one of the many committees."

Also slated for discussion this morning is a recruitment pamphlet that the administration wants to distribute throughout East Palo Alto. It is like no other college propaganda that I have ever seen. A single sheet of mimeographed paper with the title "Nairobi Cares—Attend Nairobi College," says: "Nairobi is a two-year community college established in 1969 as an alternative to those traditional institutions which exclude and alienate students and their communities. The college is on candidate status with the Western Association Accreditation Commission, and our students are able to gain entry to four-year colleges or universities as juniors when they leave here." After listing some

requirements, the paper goes on to state: "We are interested in having Nairobi serve the purpose of developing leaders so that they might serve this community and others like it. Thus the college is involved in a series of programs which allow us to behave in ways which express our beliefs. Some of the programs are: Prisoner Re-Entry Project; Teen Youth Project; Community Reading Room....Nairobi especially exists to meet the needs of students who want to attend college when their life experience has indicated to them that other institutions of higher education either refused to or were not able to include them and to meet their needs. Student participation in governance of the college is a responsibility as well as a right." No incoming student can accuse this college of having tried to mislead him. There is no mention of good times to be had during college. Here the emphasis is on discipline and service to the community. Students are simply told that if they work hard they can go to four-year colleges in California. If they press hard enough, they can find out that there are over thirty students who graduated from Nairobi and now attend colleges in the Bay Area. But there is no glamorizing of the roster of students in prestige colleges, no bow to the fashionable idea in many black colleges that "a social life" is as important as academic rigor during those years; and certainly there is no insistence here that Nairobi is the place to make contacts that will help smooth the passage through the adult world.

There is also a kind of open self-criticism among the faculty and students that seems very healthy. I saw one student tell a group of his peers that he had just gotten lazy and had failed to complete an assignment on time. "I guess it is hard to get rid of ghetto habits overnight," he said, his face unsmiling, his fists clenched. "But I really am trying." All the sympathy his confession got was the cold voice of a sister from across the room saying: "Well, you'll just have to try harder." And when that happened, I remembered a lull in the program at the all-college meeting when several students had begun to speak rather loudly in the back of the hall. Suddenly a student named Anamma in a maroon jacket and head wrap and a long blue skirt walked unscheduled to the microphone. With her mouth dripping scorn she pointed to the students who were talking and said: "You are not kids. You love to speak about respect but you don't know how to show it. When The Man puts you in jail for nothing, he is not going to treat you like a kid. So don't treat yourself like one. And even if you feel tempted to disrespect yourself, don't disrespect us with your noise. Shut up and show some pride when you are in a room with black people." Applause broke out around me. The group sheepishly moved away and the program then continued almost too decorously.



I knew all this discipline and abnegation were certainly necessary to our growth as a people, but what about the texture of the teaching, I wondered. How bright were the students, and were they using their vaunted commitment as a shield to hide their academic deficiencies? I sat in on an English class given by Mary Hoover; and while her students, who range in age from about 17 to over 45, certainly comprise a wide spectrum in talent, I was taken by their interest, their enthusiasm for their work and their refusal to be intimidated even if they knew their answers were incorrect. It is the rapport between student and teacher that makes it a pleasure to sit in on these classes. An observer sees clearly the damage done to these students by the miseducation many of them received in the public schools of California; he or she bleeds for the time they must now spend trying to hone their basic skills; but he is almost sanguine about the possibility of their success, for they have faced their inadequacies and know that it is up to them to try to change the turf on which they now stand. Later that day, I ask Moriba if he thinks Mary Hoover is a good teacher and he simply says: "If you look in her eyes when she talks to you, you will see how interested she is in your welfare. We know that our success means a lot to her, and so without consciously knowing it, we try hard to please her; and of course when we do that we please ourselves."

Some of the courses listed in the 1972-73 Nairobi college catalog are business, creative arts, mathematics, health and survival, early childhood education and communications. The latter includes Black English, which is described as a sociolinguistic course because, in addition to imparting a body of knowledge regarding the unique phonology and

syntax of Black English, the lecturer makes copious comments and references regarding the linguistic-cultural legitimacy of Black English dialect. Communications also includes Shakespeare, public speaking and comparative mythology, a comparison of African, Greek, Latin and Near-Eastern mythologies.

I ask Mwanza (a name which means wise protector), a 23-year-old student who is co-president of the student body and who came to Nairobi College after having spent nearly four years in Vacaville Penitentiary for robbery, what he thinks of the curriculum he is following. He tells me that the work he does at Nairobi prepares him for the kind of life he wants to lead. "I've been through a lot. I've seen and done a lot and I think I know that I want to spend my life helping black people in any way I can. I must get the specific skills to do this, and Nairobi gives me those skills." Mwanza is a very black, thin young man with penetrating black eyes. He wears an army jacket, maroon trousers and a blue skullcap pulled tightly over his forehead. He does not smile readily and I cannot help wondering about his bleak and bitter youth and his hopes for his future. And so I ask him what led him to Nairobi. "I've lived on the West Coast all my life," he says, "and even though around here you don't find the hard, personal oppression that black people in the South used to have to face, you grow up quickly with the knowledge that you're poor and black and likely to remain so for the rest of your life. You begin to hate yourself and your poverty. I got into this madness where I would steal from black people. That's how much I hated all things black. I heard about Nairobi College in jail where I was a member of the Black Cultural Association; and when I came here, I knew that I couldn't leave. The students and faculty showed me, without hitting me over the head, what it means to be black and to care for those black souls around you." He is silent and I sense that he is retracing those years spent on the streets of Los Angeles and Bakersfield. Suddenly he looks up and says: "Learning is an intimate thing, and with my peers I can see myself growing and moving honestly toward them. My commitment is like theirs—to black people—but I can only be really proud of that commitment if I have the skills to back it up."

As Mwanza leaves the concrete administration building, I see a lean older student in denim jacket and trousers walking through the corridors of the school. He is Horace 2X, a registered Muslim for eleven years and a very bright man. He has been at Nairobi for two quarters and has had a lifetime of experiences. He was a premed student at San Jose State but dropped out. He is now taking courses in

horticulture from a neighboring junior college while he studies business and accounting at Nairobi. He also spent nearly seven years in jail and now calmly says that he was "merely in one section of the great jail this whole country is. All black people are in it, only some can exercise at different hours from those who are behind bars." He is so glib, his answers so facile, that I tell him I think he is a dilettante for going to so many schools and not having yet decided what his life's work will be even though he continues to mouth statements about commitment to black people. "I am after information," he says, "and it doesn't really matter how many schools I go to as long as I know something about what I want to know. All the cumulative knowledge that I have will be used to benefit black people; so if I don't have the degrees to show for my years in colleges, I don't really mind." I ask him what he thinks will become of Nairobi and he says laughingly: "I look upon this place as a gene pool for the black man of the West Coast, but you will only begin to see what I mean in a few years."

The man in charge of this "gene pool" is a short, low-keyed, mustachioed man of 29. Donald Smothers avoids making extravagant claims for Nairobi. He even goes so far as to say that *maybe* the Nairobi concept won't work elsewhere but he is very sure that it is working in East Palo Alto. Smothers is from Lubbock, Texas, and he spent his early childhood in San Francisco. He majored in sociology and history from San Francisco State and is modishly dressed in leather and brown boots. He tells me that about one million dollars in loans, tuition, grants, administrative costs and salaries are spent per year in running the college. "No student is ever turned away because he can't pay for his education," he says. "The financial-aids office can offer eligible students money from several sources. The National Defense Student Loans are one source; then with Basic Educational Opportunity Grants all eligible students can earn some of their tuition through work-study programs, and of course there are federally insured loans."

Smothers says that while many people have questioned how long Nairobi would last, he has never doubted its ultimate importance to black people. "It's an experiment," he notes, "but one of those experiments that last a long time, are duplicated across the country and then all of a sudden become institutions with a history."

I ask him if the current reliance on federal funds for running the school does not disturb him in view of the jaundiced eye with which the Nixon administration seems to view such experiments. He tells me that there is always a danger inherent in relying on other people for your daily bread. He will not advocate changing the thrust of the college,

however, and he has begun to explore ways in which black people can support Nairobi financially. "We do not intend to let the danger of no funds keep us from our commitment to educate black people who see the community as their own, who want to work and live within the community and not become spectators to the deterioration of black neighborhoods. We have a philosophy of black nationalism to guide us, but that simply means that we will always act in the best interests of black people and that we do not want to change our identities in any way."

Cyril Bolden, who has been the business manager of Nairobi College for nearly a year, sees some hard days ahead for the school if it does not begin long-term planning immediately. He tells me that "foundations want results and they will get them from us if they are prepared to make grants over a long period. We can't plan properly if we think we are going to be hungry from one year to the next. I don't like our almost total reliance on the federal government. I tell the brothers and sisters here that they have to face reality. If they are going to accept white money, then they have got to expect white accountability." I ask him if he has been able to make sense out of the books left from those early chaotic days when Nairobi College was born, and he says: "We are straightening those out. At last. Now that I have the responsibility for money matters here, I buttonhole everyone I see to tell him or her that while we must keep our ideology intact in how we carry ourselves, there is no ideology when it comes to fiscal responsibility. The books must balance and every penny must be accounted for."

At the end of a particularly tiring day, I speak to Dwight Brown, a teacher of English at the college. He is 25 years old, a graduate of Yale and a candidate for a PhD at Stanford. He is vociferous in his praise of the other teachers, who he says seem to have much more than their required doses of dedication. As for himself, he is more than pleased with the way his teaching has turned out. "After I left Yale, I was looking for just the kind of situation I found at Nairobi: highly motivated but poorly prepared kids who were willing to work hard. I really don't have to push them and that is a welcome relief." I ask Brown, who came from St. Louis, Missouri, if he thinks the Nairobi concept can be duplicated across the country and he echoes Bob Hoover's observations that the worst pathologies of the ghetto must not be present in abundance or the school simply will not survive.

If one grants that Nairobi College is working in East Palo Alto, one must also wonder about its future. Hoover tells me that he would like to see it grow to a total enrollment of 500 students (there are about 220 today) and that this growth would mean establishing permanent library and science facilities.

Smothers feels that the school should always be without a fixed campus, for he wants anyone in the community to regard the college as a potential way station where black souls can come to learn that others share their past pain and want to plan their future. And Brown, euphoric about what he has found on the West Coast, thinks that Nairobi's insistence on teaching its students that the leaders of a people are really their servants will tone down the self-aggrandizement of black "spokesmen," and will ultimately change the elitist thrust of the potential black thinkers in the country.

As the week ended I thought that the Nairobi experiment was really a naked call to ferret out the seeds of black pride that lie dormant in an abused people. And it is this call, really, that gives these students their bearing and their confidence in themselves. They come, after all, from ghettos in which black men give up early, but it is their current realization that black life in this country is truly a triumph over tragedy that pushes them, now, to give substance to that triumph. It is no wonder, then, that in the college catalog a pantheon of black heroes are quoted. Patrice Lumumba: "A man without nationalist tendencies is a man without a soul." Marcus Garvey: "Look for me in the whirlwind or the storm, look for me all around you, for...I shall come and bring with me countless millions of black slaves who have died in America and the West Indies and the millions in Africa to aid you in the fight for Liberty, Freedom and Life." For much as Yeats in "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" conjures up images of Irish valor, or just as Hester Prynne proudly wears her scarlet letter, so do these students who, in the teeth of a country that has misused them, insist that in the incontrovertibility of their blackness lies their freedom from mediocrity.

As I left East Palo Alto, I could not help but praise the Nairobi College experiment. The faculty and students know that they must try anything to rescue our black future, and they know, too, that some of the criticism leveled at many black colleges by David Riesman and Christopher Jencks in *The Academic Revolution* is overdue. The authors say that "instead of being third-rate imitations of Harvard and Berkeley, or perhaps Amherst and Riverside...the Negro colleges should reconsider their role and strike out in new directions." No one can seriously argue about that. Nairobi College students couldn't care less about their lack of ivy. So even if they cannot yet begin to see the end of their fight for excellence and for money—even if their experiment cannot be duplicated elsewhere and their insouciance over custom brings shudders to the backs of traditional black educators—they know what they are about, for to them "seriousness" has become a lovely word. ■