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Meditations on Being Good

Margalynne Armstrong†

When I reflect upon my experiences as a Black woman professor of law, I find myself thinking more about the students than about any other aspect of my work. Students are the reason that I am teaching law, perhaps more so for me than for other professors. This is so even though I know that being student-oriented is not the traditional path to success in this profession. My thoughts about students are not always positive; I am often frustrated with or exasperated by them. Nevertheless, I confess I sometimes identify with the students more than with other faculty. After all, when I was a law student I never encountered a professor of my race and gender. During my first two years of teaching there were students, but no faculty, who looked like me. Because I feel so connected to them, what I might mean to students and what I believe I should be to students is the focus of this meditation. One sentence, spoken to me by a student, is the springboard from which I dive into these reflections.

During my first week as a law professor, two Black women students dropped by my office to introduce themselves and to welcome me. Towards the end of the visit one of the women finally blurted out the message she had come to relay to me, a Black woman new to this law school. She said, "Girl, you'd better be good." I still deliberate about these words and the various meanings they carry. These were words of advice and warning (how ominous they sounded), they were a plea, a cheer and a challenge.

The advice contained in the admonition to be good would be useful to any new law professor without regard to the novice's race or gender. After all, doesn't every new teacher have to be good? At least these days, new law professors must be outstanding teachers, scholars and community servants. There are so many excellent candidates competing for the privilege of teaching law that a poor teacher can easily be replaced by someone better. It is obvious that the new law teacher had better be good. Why, then, did this student feel the need to communicate the obvious to me?

Was the warning to be good a way of communicating the danger I faced as a Black woman in a world that has so many preconceptions

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about minority women, few of which relate to the image of a law professor? Did I face suspicion just because I was not what students expected? Was there a chance that some people were just waiting for me to do something wrong or stupid, something that would confirm their suspicions that a Black woman did not belong at the front of a law school classroom? Was the student trying to warn me that such people existed at our law school?

It is possible that the ominous tone I heard in her words was merely a projection of the fear I felt as I began teaching. I feared the students, their judgment of me and their power over me. Their assessment of my performance would determine my future as a law professor. Although I am sure that all new teachers are frightened of students at first, I felt my fears were enhanced because I was so noticeably different from most of my audience. I feared that students would not respect me because of my differences, despite my achievements, qualifications and experience. I doubt that I will ever completely dispel my fear of discrimination because my fears are confirmed time and time again, particularly when I let down my guard.¹

When I think of the plea in "Girl, you'd better be good," I consider the significance of the fact that this student felt that she could or should speak to me so. The student spoke as one Black woman speaks to another at home or at the beauty parlor, somewhere comfortable, but certainly not at a law school. At law school, if women of color speak at all,² we tend to conform our speech to the environment. Many minorities must be bicultural and bilingual in order to succeed in our society. People of color often leave behind the language and culture of home when we go off to work or to the university. The separate world of home is unrecognized and irrelevant at the law school.

But this student, who had made it through two years of law school and knew its language and forms, spoke to me as if she were at home. I was not her superior, the professor. I was "Girl" like she was Girl, like the student who came with her was Girl. Girl could be an equal or a co-conspirator or an ignoramus who had better listen because she could learn a thing or two from the speaker. What did it mean to this student

¹ For example, I was on vacation in Portland, Oregon a few summers ago and was denied a motel room because of my race. Had I anticipated discrimination, I certainly would have avoided the establishment as the experience was quite upsetting. I eventually received a settlement after filing an administrative complaint. For other anecdotes that support the permanence of my fear, see Taunya Lovell Banks, *Two Life Stories* (published elsewhere in this volume of the Berkeley Women's Law Journal), and Patricia Williams, *Spirit Murdering the Messenger: The Discourse of Fingerprinting as the Law's Response to Racism*, 42 U Miami L Rev 127 (1987).

² Women law students report voluntary class participation less often than men, and their voluntary participation decreases over time. Taunya Lovell Banks, *Gender Bias in the Classroom*, 38 J Legal Ed 137, 141-42 (1988). Women of color at predominantly white law schools report never volunteering at slightly higher rates than white women. Taunya Lovell Banks, *Minority Women and Law School: Testimony Prepared for the ABA Minority Women Lawyers Subcommittee Roundtable 4* (Oct 18, 1989) (on file with the Berkeley Women's Law Journal).

to feel that she could speak to a law teacher in the voice she used at home?

It must have felt good to use a voice that she had learned to subordinate in her professional life. To use the home voice in law school is an affirmation of the self that Black women professionals often must leave behind. Our home voices are wise and helping voices, nurturing voices, voices accorded much respect at home but valued little in the outside world. That student's home voice had knowledge to share. Her voice had insight and experience that could help me find my way around this new place. The suppression of our home voices in the academic and working world is a loss, both for Black women and for all others. If only our worlds were not so disjointed!

This student also spoke because she had some investment in me. I think she felt that Black law students stood to lose if I were not good. They would be identified with me because of our shared race. If I failed *they* would somehow be undermined by my disgrace. The plea within her words was to "refrain from doing anything to set us back." Although this is the negative side of her identification with me, I also see positive aspects. I feel the student wanted me to do well. She was rooting for me the same way I root for the Black quarterback or the Black actor playing Macbeth, those who are doing that which "They" said we could never do.

I finally come to the challenge in "Girl, you'd better be good." The challenge to be good is what sticks with me, what I hope I will always remember. I am overwhelmed by the many meanings of being good and by the difficulty of being good. Being good means doing good, doing the right thing (I struggle with even knowing what the right thing is, much less doing it). Being good means being a good teacher, somehow helping students become good and just lawyers. I usually find that I do not need to teach students to be good people; they already are. If I am to be good, I need to help students see that their goodness applies to the study and practice of law. A good part of being a good law teacher is imparting the relevance of our individual goodness to the law.

When I reflect upon the student who came to tell me I'd better be good, I think of how I must strive to recognize and sustain the voices that students bring to law school. These are the voices of real life and they are often suppressed by traditional legal education. I will succeed as a Black woman law professor if I help students to preserve their home voices even as they succeed in law school. I will be a good teacher if I enable them to cherish their voices as important resources in the practice of law. I will be good if I teach my students to make their home voices a part of the legal world, a part that contributes generously to the formation of the law of the future.