**CLINT SMITH – How to Raise a Black Son in America** TED Talk

Growing up, I didn't always understand why my parents made me follow the rules that they did. Like, why did I really have to mow the lawn? Why was homework really that important? Why couldn't I put jelly beans in my oatmeal?

My childhood was abound with questions like this. Normal things about being a kid and realizing that sometimes, it was best to listen to my parents even when I didn't exactly understand why. And it's not that they didn't want me to think critically. Their parenting always sought to reconcile the tension between having my siblings and I understand the realities of the world, while ensuring that we never accepted the status quo as inevitable.

I came to realize that this, in and of itself, was a very purposeful form of education. One of my favorite educators, Brazilian author and scholar Paulo Freire, speaks quite explicitly about the need for education to be used as a tool for critical awakening and shared humanity. In his most famous book, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," he states, "No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so."

I've been thinking a lot about this lately, this idea of humanity, and specifically, who in

This world is afforded the privilege of being perceived as fully human. Over the course of the past several months, the world has watched as unarmed black men, and women, have had their lives taken at the hands of police and vigilante. These events and all that has transpired after them have brought me back to my own childhood and the decisions that my parents made about raising a black boy in America, that growing up, I didn't always understand in the way that I do now.

I think of how hard it must have been, how profoundly unfair it must have felt for them to feel like they had to strip away parts of my childhood just so that I could come home at night.

For example, I think of how one night, when I was around 12 years old, on an overnight field trip to another city, my friends and I bought Super Soakers and turned the hotel parking lot into our own water-filled battle zone. We hid behind cars, running through the darkness that lay between the streetlights, boundless laughter ubiquitous across the pavement. But within 10 minutes, my father came outside, grabbed me by my forearm and led me into our room with an unfamiliar grip. Before I could say anything, tell him how foolish he had made me look in front of my friends, he derided me for being so naïve. Looked me in the eye, fear consuming his face, and said, "Son, I'm sorry, but you can't act the same as your white friends. You can't pretend to shoot guns. You can't run around in the dark. You can hide behind anything other than your own teeth."

I know now how cared he must have been, how easily I could have fallen into the empty of the night, that some man would mistake this water for a good reason to wash all of this away.

These are the sorts of messages I've been inundated with my entire life: Always keep your hands where they can see them, don't move too quickly, take off your hood when the sun goes down. My parents raised me and my siblings in an armor of advice, an ocean of alarm bells so someone wouldn't steal the breath from our lungs, so that they wouldn't make a memory of this skin. So that we could be kids, not casket or concrete. And it's not because they thought it would make us better than anyone else it's simply because they wanted to keep us alive.

All of my black friends were raised with the same message, the talk, given to us when we became old enough to be mistaken for a nail ready tot be hammered to the ground, when people made our melanin synonymous with something to be feared.

But what does it do to a child to grow up knowing that you cannot simply be a child? That the whims of adolescence are too dangerous for your breath, that you cannot simply be curious, that you are not afforded the luxury of making a mistake, that someone's implicit bias might be the reason you don't wake up in the morning.

But this cannot be what defines us. Because we have parents who raised us to understand that our bodies weren't meant for the backside of a bullet, but for flying kites and jumping rope, and laughing until our stomachs burst. We had teachers who taught us how to raise our hands in class, and not just to signal surrender, and that the only thing we should give up is the idea that we aren't worthy of this world. So when we say that black lives matter, it's not because other's don't, it's simply because we must affirm that we are worthy of existing without fear, when so many things tell us we are not. I want to live in a world where my son will not be presumed guilty the moment he is born, where a toy in his hand isn't mistaken for anything other than a toy.

And I refuse to accept that we can't build this world into something new, some place where a child's name doesn't have to be written on a t-shirt, or a tombstone, where the value of someone's life isn't determined by anything other than the fact that they had lungs, a place where every single one of us can breathe.