

Mark P Neyer
Dr. Todd
Rhetoric
9-13-03

In order to make this exploratory essay appeal to the target audience of future rhetoric classes at Xavier, I have attempted to insert some rather simple, dry humor. I find that this sort of droll humor seems to please audiences of my peers, regardless of their age. I have also included some overt statements of fact at the end, particularly the disgust I have with some of the implications keys can have. People in this sort of audience tend to be rather idealistic, and thus I think they respond well to overt statements, especially statements that criticize society.

Keys

I have a stick of RAM on my key chain. It's a long green silicon wafer, with copper circuits etched on it. There used to be four little black RAM modules, but those fell off a while ago. The silicon is a little aged, and the edges are sort of faded. I guess the RAM is a way of telling people that I like computers, but it also makes the keys easier to hold. I do a lot of thinking about things as simple as keys.

One of the items attached to my key ring is a little white plastic square, which identifies itself as a 'Krogers Plus' shopper's card. The back of it is emblazoned with a UPC code. I've long been suspicious of that little plastic card. Krogers, a grocery store, will offer you small price discounts on various foodstuffs such as sourdough pretzels if you swipe your little UPC code across the scanner at the checkout aisle. It could be some giant Orwellian scheme to monitor individual purchasing patterns. They ask you your name and address when you sign up for the little card, and I suspect that they're probably keeping records of who buys what. The records are compiled in giant consumer purchasing matrices, and used to strategically send you targeted advertisements. Are most Americans really willing to sacrifice

their collective privacy for 25 cents off a big bag of Meow Mix? My guess is yes.

Also on my key ring is a key to China. Or so I tell people. It's a little small round thing, with the word 'CHINA' printed on it. I think I've convinced a few children, but not anyone else. I've never been particularly good at making things up. It's really just a key to a bike lock. I used to bike to work, and I'd lock my bike up next to the dumpster. I'm not sure if I ever really feared that anyone would steal my bike, but I did like having a little lock with which to secure it. I spent a good three minutes winding the little plastic-coated metal wire through the spokes of the bike wheel, primarily because I thought it looked neat.

The only other key of interest on the key chain is the key to the Lexus that I drive. The car belongs to my parents, but they don't like driving it anymore because my mom smashed up the front when she hydroplaned on the entrance ramp to I-75 one miserably rainy Friday. Instead of paying eight hundred dollars for the factory-manufactured headlights, I went to a cheap auto parts store and bought some generic sealed beams – they kind of headlights you'll find on a 1985 Plymouth Reliant. The headlights are secured to the bumper with some metal brackets and electrical tape. I'm not sure if I've got them oriented properly because the trees seem rather illuminated while I'm driving. I've never really cared much about how things look so long as they're functional, and this really isn't any more apparent than in the front bumper of my car.

The Lexus key has one of those handy buttons that unlocks your car doors by

remote. I used to drive a Toyota Camry without such a key. There was one occasion when I was approaching my car, and the two other people near me whipped out their key chains and unlocked their car doors with their key chains, their cars honking in acknowledgment. I whipped out my key chain, pressed my thumb down on the Toyota key, and said "Yarp! Yarp!" I didn't unlock the car door, but I did elicit a few odd looks, which were almost as rewarding.

I worked at Wendy's for a while, and one of the most annoying aspects of the job was the "Manager's Key." All of the managers have access to a special key that enables them to change orders that have been entered, or open the drawer to give some drunk in a Metallica t-shirt a refund on his junior bacon cheeseburger. If there was any feature on the register that might enable you to steal from the restaurant, it required a key to activate. (They obviously had a lot of faith in the integrity of their employees.) The features requiring a key included things as simple as changing a customer's order when they decide they want a cheeseburger and a Hawaiian punch, no... wait... HI-C..., and how about... no... wait... no, a Coke and some nuggets. And no pickles on the cheeseburger. Every time this happened, I'd have to ask the manager for their key so I could go back and change the order, and then the manager would give me a such a look that you'd think I'd asked to borrow a kidney.

I was once looking at a key on my girlfriend's nightstand and admiring its simple shape, when I started thinking about the nature of keys themselves. I realized that keys, by their very existence, imply distrust of humanity. We use keys to lock things up that we don't want other people getting into. The fact that we use a physical construct instead of a social one

implies that none of us trust each other to obey a request. In spite of this, keys are often used to symbolize information, access, and secrets, but rarely distrust. People are granted the "Key to the City" when they've done something well. You can read about "The key to a diversified investment portfolio" or even "The key to rock-hard abs." In that sense, keys are symbolic of discovery – the key has been found, the secret can be unlocked. But in the real world, if you have to find a key to unlock something, it's because you were never meant to find it in the first place. If you want a symbol that can succinctly embody the fact that people inherently do not trust one another, the key is definitely it.

At a lot of cash registers, you'll see little containers with a picture of some small child, and a placard reading something like "Please help 10 year old A.J. Nye. He needs a double-lung transplant and this operation costs approximately one hundred thousand dollars. Your donation is appreciated." Invariably there is a little lock placed on the opening of the box to prevent people from taking money out of it. That's about as distrustful of others as you can get. That little padlock there is implying that people can be expected to steal a dollar from a 10 year old facing a life-threatening illness. Sadly, I think there's truth to that expectation.