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LIVING BROWN THEN, LIVING BROWN NOW

William Gipson

...I want to center my comments primarily around two of the important figures in my life. There are many, but the two I want to talk about as a way of getting into my contribution today are two men in my family, my maternal grandfather and my own father. In fact, in many ways I embody both of them. I inherited my maternal grandfather's high metabolism and my father's height.

My maternal grandfather was born in Louisiana in 1906. I think he's now...about three years. He would object if I said he was born into a poor family, but he was born into a black family in rural north Louisiana. And, the reason I say he would object if I said he came from a poor family is because all his family ever knew was to work hard, take care their own business, go to church, and rear their families. And, for him that was a rich life, but he was always clear about how his life was constrained by the fact that whites of his era had a problem with his skin color. I don't know how he figured out that it wasn't his problem; it was their problem. And, he always talked that way as long as I remember. It wasn't his problem.

I don't know how in the world he did it, though I do have some...I have to admit, there are some clues. So, 50 years later in 1956 I appear. I'm the third child of his oldest child, my mother. So, you can probably figure out that there's a connection. I was given his first name, which is Christian, as my middle name, and he and I always had a very close relationship. In fact, I did the eulogy at his funeral. He was well in his nineties when he passed away.

My father among other things served in World War II in the navy, and was a very outspoken, strong-willed, very charming man in any dimension. And he was a minister. I spent most of my early years moving from one state to another because of his pastorage. Even though I identify myself primarily as a Louisianian, I spent my early years also in Texas, in Oklahoma, in Arkansas, and when my father passed away he was actually pastoring a church in the Midwest, in Lafayette, Indiana. I was a teenager at that time. I was about 15 years old.

So, how does this figure into what I'm going to share with you? I grew up primarily - in those states I named for you - in rigidly segregated neighborhoods, save for Indiana - rigidly segregated. There was always a black side of town and a white side of town. And, interestingly enough, just from observing phenotypes in this room, other groups didn't come into play. They were nowhere to be seen. We didn't know of other people. In fact, my grandmother would whisper sometimes to say - we were Baptist and she would go - "Oh, you know, they're Methodists." So, Methodists were odd to us. You have to understand that.

So, there's the black side of town, there's the white side of town. I went to school with black kids, I went to church with black kids, I played with black kids. The only time actually I saw white kids was when my grandmother was sometimes brought home from her day work, and the white woman she worked for would chauffer her home. And my grandmother would be sitting in the back and sometimes there would be a white kid on the back seat with my grandmother, and my grandmother would get out of the car and we'd rush to her, and the little white kid would say, "Goodbye, Susie. We'll see you later." So, really, my only interaction with white kids at all had to do with my grandmother's work when she would do day work.

As a result, I developed in my own mind a sense of what the white world was like. A lot of it was absolutely false. I thought basically all whites were rich. I thought basically all whites were educated formally. I basically decided that all whites were okay unless you crossed them about crossing the race line. I grew up knowing that there was a group of people called Knight Riders. I remember my parents whispering to each other sometimes, "They're riding tonight." And, then they would collect me and my siblings and they'd take us somewhere, to church or to members' homes, or whatever, and then maybe in a day or two days later they would come and get us.

It wasn't until I was a teenager that I realized that these were KKK and White Citizen Council raids in black neighborhoods, and especially where there had been some issue that infuriated them. It could be something as significant as the death of a white and there was a question about how did this person die and was a black responsible for it, or something as casual as something that caused a number of black men to lose their lives or otherwise be maimed by looking at white women. And my father - I mentioned that he was very outspoken - was already pushing issues. He had a lot of pride, and the fact that he had served his country was very important to him, and he continued to resist...

So, I learned later what kind of danger the family was in, but I was really remarkably impressed with how our parents never

really talked to us about that. I think it had to do with not wanting us to grow up with a sense of fear. I think they wanted us to have the same kind of sense of self that my maternal grandfather had. And, I think that they were very successful with that. All of my teachers knew me. That's the bane of having a parent who has some kind of public prominence. So, we all had to do exceptionally well in school. Otherwise we were really in trouble. "You're Reverend Gipson's son. You got to do this." And that set up certain kinds of hierarchies. So, the Gipson children were always tapped for the plays and for the speaking parts. We don't have enough time to get into the class divisions within the African American community. They were there, and they continue to be there. And the gap is much wider now than it was when I was growing up. But, we had to well in school.

So, 1954, Brown versus the Board of Education. In 1970, a period of time when we were still in the South, was the first time that I went to school with white kids. 1954 to 1970. The resistance was incredible. One of the things I really want to point out here: I remember that around that time when the city fathers knew they could resist no more -- and we were back in Louisiana at that time - there were at least, in this small town of 50,000 people, three Christian academies that sprung up between the end of one school year and the beginning of the one that would mark the beginning of integration. There were Christian academies. And, so, I will make a confession to you: I have always been suspect since then of a certain kind of white Protestant evangelicalism because it wasn't being...those churches that created these Christian academies, no blacks were admitted. A real shame, coming from my own Christian witness.

Throughout the South, these Christian academies sprung up. They were 100% white. No blacks were allowed because the public schools were being integrated. And I discovered that once the schools were integrated a whole lot of things about myself I didn't know before. I could not have possibly known because I lived entirely in a black world. I realized that there were certain things that I had not been exposed to. My grandfather, the very practical grandfather that I told you about, said this to me. I don't know if it was original with him but he said this. He says, "Brother," that's what my family calls me, "you're going to school with white kids and I want you to know this. We are Christian people. I want you to know that there is an eleventh Commandment. You know the 10 Commandments. The 11th Commandment is 'Wheresoever the white man's children are there you shall find all the public money.' That's why you are going to these integrated schools."

And, I really thank my grandfather. There's nothing magical about sitting next to white kids in his mind. He understood in a very practical kind of way that all of his tax money had been going to support a certain level of education for white kids and one that was a bit more deficient for his own grandchildren. He was very clear about that. Martin Luther King was not his hero... These people you have to understand had to find a way to live with dignity. So, when King started talking about how we'll all get together, my grandfather was not impressed at all. In terms of rights, absolutely. But, he really didn't care to live next to whites at all; but he realized what we needed to have in order to succeed.

I want to say to you that Brown versus the Board of Education in the view of my grandfather and my grandmother was not inevitable. It was not like they just knew this stuff. They were as surprised, I think, as some whites. They didn't know it was going to happen. I don't think they really paid attention to desegregation cases. There had been segregation all their lives, so I don't think they really paid attention to what happened April 17, 1954 until it was there. And then they realized how quickly they had to move forward.

Communities remained rigidly segregated even after Brown, even after 1970. There were a whole lot of fights, as you know, about busing. My grandparents remained committed to the idea of the resource... My father, on the other hand, was a bridge figure; he saw hope... My father, by the time we moved to Indiana, had developed quite a reputation as one of these bridge figures. My father was the one who contacted the rabbi in West Lafayette, Indiana and said let's do a pulpit exchange. So, it wasn't just about religion; it was about race. He would appear in this white congregation as a black preacher, who was by the way educated. My father went to a historically black college that's now defunct, Bishop College in Dallas, Texas. He was an educated man, very well-spoken. And this rabbi would come to Second Baptist Church in Lafayette, Indiana.

So, I began to have this exposure as a teenager to what it could mean to actually live in a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-faith kind of world. My father had that kind of hope.

And that is a way for me to get into what I want to end with: Plurality for my own children. My children have grown up in what has been described as integrated neighborhoods. What that really means is that they have either been the only black kids or a handful of black kids in white settings, for I have spent most of my adult life in the Northeast, New York State, New Jersey, and now Pennsylvania.

My children's experience of integration is not through the public schools, because the public schools, as you already know, you've studied them, continue to be in most cases still rigidly segregated. It's been in independence schools. So, these questions of access really have to do with the kind of future they will experience. How they are going to have to work with other people who are committed to creating opportunities for all kids to get quality education. That they won't have to make the kind of

decisions that their mother and I made about what we would do in terms of their education.

We still believe, and the record is there, if you compare Philadelphia public schools to public schools in Montgomery County, the resources, the gap in the resources is just stupendous. And this remains our challenge. From 1956 when I was born now here we are in 2004, it remains. And I have to say, I think for my grandfather, charter schools. He would say, "Absolutely. Let's do charter schools." My father would be with Paul Vallas. He would say, "We can make the Philadelphia Public School system absolutely one of the best that will include and educate all the children of Philadelphia..."

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