

Our History's Complicated Past

Written by Walter Fields

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As we kick-off Black History Month, we begin a 28 day sojourn to explore the depths of African-American struggle, achievement and contribution to the American narrative. While we search for the uniquely Black experience of our nation's democratic experience, we would be doing a disservice to the history of our nation if we did not acknowledge and decipher the complex relationship of white America to our own historical accounting. One of the complexities of Black history is that its evidence is often undeniably tied to the behavior and actions of whites.

So, here is a little personal narrative that reveals the manner in which Black achievement is often entangled with the reality of white society, and occurs in close proximity to the situational reality of white America.

My grandmother Dora hailed from a small town on the North Carolina eastern seaboard, Snow Hill. "Miss Dora" was well known in town and very respected, and her children were equally regarded. During my summer visits to see "Momma Dora," as her grandchildren knew her, one of my favorite activities was going in town to shop. One of the remarkable aspects of her daily living was the relationship she had with white residents in Snow Hill. It was the 1960s and though I was young I was well aware of what being "down south" meant and that Blacks and whites lived separate existences though in close proximity to each other. This "history" made my trips shopping with Momma Dora that much more memorable as I saw first-hand that some whites, while still advantaged by the legacy of Jim Crow, understood the importance of treating African-American elders with respect. Hearing the workers at Serve Well Supermarket, in their southern drawl, greet my grandmother with "Mornin' Miss Dora" and help carry her bags out of the store would always elicit a smile and make me beam with pride. Whether those workers' personal feelings mirrored their professional demeanor, I do not know. What I do know is that they had the good sense and common courtesy to know well enough to respect an older Black adult.

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Years later as I sat grieving in my grandmother's Pentecostal church during her funeral the mayor of Snow Hill, Ben Rayford, was one of the individuals who delivered condolences. As he delivered his remarks, he was overcome with emotion as he spoke of how Miss Dora, my Momma Dora, had practically reared him as a little boy and he regarded her with the same love and respect as he had for his own mother. It was a moment of profound enlightenment and pride for a 17 year-old Black high school student. From that moment I began to think more deeply about how cruel Jim Crow was that it placed artificial barriers between people based upon fears and that Black history was inextricably tied to the experiences of whites.

The historical circle that began to unfold at my grandmother's funeral was completed in 2001. That year my cousin, Don Davis, the great-grandson of my grandmother's step sister, ran against Ben Rayford for mayor of Snow Hill. Don is a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, holds two master's degrees and a doctorate in education. The race actually pitted family against "family." To the credit of both men, they ran a campaign that was not bitter and was focused on how to improve their community. Don was victorious and became the youngest mayor in Snow Hill's history, at age 29, and later was elected to the North Carolina State Senate; where he now serves.

It is a remarkable circle of humanity, in that a young Black man of the south could run for elective office in his hometown and defeat a white candidate who was tied to his family by the peculiar social conflagration of Jim Crow. In other words, we can all get along if we are truthful and respectful of our complicated histories and committed to embracing humanity as God intended.

The African-American narrative is a story of human exceptionalism and triumph; a tale of courage and determination, and source of inspiration and pride that should not be confined to Blacks but also embraced by many whites as well who are tied to our story. Black History is the American experience and should be celebrated by all for its richness and diversity.

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