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A Southern White Man's Lessons on How to Grow Up Racist

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Abstract: In this reflective essay, the author recalls his socialization to White Supremacist ideology as a child in Virginia in the 1950s as a way to consider how racist perspectives are perpetuated across generations.

Keywords: racism, acculturation, human development, white supremacy, segregation



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Introduction¹

At the 2018 JoLLE Winter Conference, after hearing Little Rock Nine Civil Rights pioneer Elizabeth Eckford speak, I bought a copy of *The Worst First Day*, written by Elizabeth with assistance from Dr. Eurydice Stanley and her 15-year-old daughter Grace. This graphic narrative, designed for young readers, relates Elizabeth's first-hand account of being among the 9 students recruited to desegregate Little Rock Central HS in 1957 amidst tumultuous, hostile resistance from the school's historically White enrollment, and from their parents and other community members. I hope that *The Worst First Day*, along with similar narratives in graphic form by people like John Lewis (2013, 2015, 2016), can meet their authors' goals to educate young people on how it feels to be the object of racial hatred.

It's hard to read or watch about the conflict and violence of the integration movement without responding emotionally. I was very moved by hearing Elizabeth speak, and then reading her narrative about her experiences in Little Rock. I was also moved to reflect on Elizabeth's frightful account by looking back at my own socialization to racism as a boy growing up in Virginia in the 1950s and 1960s, where my schools and community were legally segregated for most of the time I lived there. In this essay, I take the occasion of Elizabeth's visit to use my own experiences to understand how such violent resistance to other people's civil rights can become entrenched and ultimately normalized in individuals, communities, and institutions.

As my acknowledgements state, this essay has benefited from critical responses from a set of trusted friends and readers. Among the most

difficult concerns raised by my respondents have come in the form of questions about my motivation: Why are you writing this essay about your own life and not about Eckford's, given that she served as the impetus for the writing? And for whom are you writing your recognition of your own racist acculturation?

The first of these questions is probably easier than the second. I undertake this consideration as part of a career-long effort to understand human development through the lens of cultural psychology. This field examines human growth as a function of how social settings mediate beliefs, thinking, and a sense of appropriate conduct (Cole, 1996; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Vygotsky, 1934/1987; Wertsch, 1985). In essence, I reflect on how being immersed in a segregated, hateful, White supremacist society helped to shape discriminatory worldviews when I was barely out of diapers. I use this experience to help me consider how such a mob of hateful, abusive people could grow to surround, belittle, and attack a small set of teenagers trying to do the unthinkable: enroll as students in a school that had previously excluded them on racial grounds, just one of many forms of segregation faced by African Americans in a society predicated on the separation of the races. I am writing this essay in large part because I need to understand the social dynamics at work in racism then, and in racism today. Reflecting on my own experiences helps me come closer to grasping how racism functions both in large, systemic ways and in how those institutionalized norms become enacted in interpersonal relationships.

I use my own boyhood experiences to consider how cultures—especially the more insular local cultures of the 50s and 60s, before the expansion of media

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I use

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

and the Internet—can limit what people see as possible, and reinforce discriminatory assumptions in subtle, powerful ways. When reading *The Worst First Day*, you might find it be easy to dismiss the horrific racism that surrounded Little Rock’s integration as the despicable actions of a large group of immoral, hate-filled individuals formed into mobs. That conclusion has merit. Yet like many critiques of racism, it locates the problem over there, back then. My intention is to come closer to home, within my own socialization as a child to a White supremacist ideology.

Rather than viewing racism from afar, I take an emic perspective on the formation of racists ideologies in people like me who have grown up within White supremacist social organizations. I consider my own socialization in order to put myself in the thick of the mob itself, and to consider how people can grow into the type of person who can hate another on sight, entirely because of their racial appearance (and appearances do matter; see Hobbs, 2014). What sort of social and cultural conditioning produces such conduct? How did sweet little babies grow into such violent bigots? I undertake this imaginative experiment because I learned to hate when I was a toddler, as a consequence of living in a segregated community. If you respond by wondering why I would be concerned with the old, obsolete problem of segregation, then I suggest reading more extensively on how segregation is enacted in modern times, in “post-racial America” (De la Roca, Ellen, & O’Regan, 2014).

The Worst First Day is reviewed more extensively in this issue of JoLLE, and so is not the centerpiece of this essay, even if it serves as the impetus. My

intended audience does not include those working in Critical Whiteness Studies, whose resident scholars (e.g., Tanner & Berchini, 2017) might find such narratives to be well-worn territory by now, unnecessarily trodden here and elsewhere, and trodden here in directions of little concern to the *cognoscenti* of this field. Nor am I writing for the benefit of most people of color, who I assume would already have given a lot of thought to how racist ideologies have become ingrained in White people, and don’t need my narrative to inform their understanding. If I have an intended, particular audience, it would be other White people: those whose own lives have been complicated by their

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immersion in racist environments and whose acknowledgement of their own complicity might help them navigate and address the current racial-social landscape more reflectively; and White people who believe that they are not complicit in racism at all, that it is of someone else’s making and is someone else’s problem, such that they needn’t consider how racism might be everyone’s problem, especially if they deny

their possible role in both systemic and interpersonal racism by having selective memories of their racial histories.

I hope that my narrative helps to show racist socialization in the nascent periods of human development can shape a worldview in powerful, near-indelible ways that may take a lifetime to eradicate, if then. I don’t defend racism. Instead, I reflect on how easily it can consume the people within its sphere, before they even understand what they have come to believe, no matter how sincere their intentions are to do right thing as they mature.

An Autobiographical Account of Life in a Segregated Community

When Elizabeth crossed the color line at Little Rock Central in 1957, I could not have been more oblivious. I was born in late October of 1952, so was still a tunnel-visioned 4-year-old more concerned with chasing frogs than changing a racist society. We now refer to the iconic photograph of her walking fearfully, yet with dignity, amidst White supremacists screaming at and spitting on her, as having “gone viral” across world newspapers and TV screens. Yet the outrage never penetrated my dim little mind, given that I didn’t watch the news then. I doubt if we even owned a TV in 1957 to watch the 3 or so black-and-white channels available. Nor did I read the papers yet and could never have understood the issues had I seen the pictures.

I was born in New Jersey while my father, at the time a young meteorologist, was working with mathematician John von Neumann at Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study, formulating how to use the new invention of the computer to forecast weather (National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, 2007). At age six months, I moved with my parents and older sister to Alexandria, Virginia, where we bought a modest house about 10 miles from Washington, D.C. Fairfax County was about to become the fastest-growing county in the nation, but we lived on a dirt road in a brand-new, barely launched housing development, near a creek where I spent most of my time throwing rocks and chasing amphibians and other fauna who easily evaded my clumsy efforts to bring them to justice.

I’m not sure why my parents chose Virginia as a home for my father’s career in Washington, D.C., where at age 29 he was appointed the director of the Weather Bureau’s Washington lab. I don’t know why they chose our house in an undeveloped, unincorporated area on the fringe of segregated

Alexandria over a neighborhood in integrated Maryland. I suspect it was because it was more affordable; they had both grown up with very little money.

Virginia was legally segregated, with the races required to use separate and unequal schools, restrooms, water fountains, and other public places. The neighborhood that grew up around us was all-White. You may have seen *Remember the Titans*, which focused on the integration of T.C. Williams HS, one of our rivals and a historically African American school during my years in Virginia. That story was set in the early 1970s, well after our schools finally integrated when I was in the seventh grade in 1964. The film shows how integration often inflamed, more than stilled, the passions of hate, even several years after the forced desegregation of the schools. The Hollywood ending of reconciliation, I’m sure, overlooked the enduring effects of racial socialization to continue to produce hate and fear.

When my own schools began admitting African American students, the integration of public spaces was well underway. Perhaps the inevitability of a desegregated society reduced the stress on historically White Fairfax County schools as they opened their doors, however reluctantly and late in the integration process, to students of color. It probably helped that the integration of Mark Twain Junior High was achieved with a single African American student, a seemingly pleasant boy—we were never in the same class and never met personally elsewhere—who must have been less terrifying to my teachers and classmates than the 9 mid-teens who had crossed the line in Little Rock 7 years before.

The Worst First Day includes images and material designed to educate the reader about the times, such as slogans reproduced from signs made by

antagonistic White students playing out racist hatred. For instance, one of the Little Rock Nine, Minnijean Brown Trickey, was expelled for verbally responding to a group of girls who taunted her and hit her in the head with a purse filled with solid objects. Her expulsion led some White students to create and post a banner reading ONE DOWN...EIGHT TO GO. Elizabeth details many instances of the bullying that she and her fellow pioneers experienced, from sudden bursts of hot water in school showers after coordinated efforts by classmates to shut off their own water and produce a scalding stream on Elizabeth, to routine hallway tripping and locker-slams, to virtually any form of torment possible. Given my remoteness from the single student integrating my junior high school, I can't say if such things happened at Mark Twain Junior High.

At Edison High School, my next stop, there were about 40 African American students out of over 2,000 total. Not surprisingly, they navigated the school in groups, with little mixing across racial lines. I only recall them as a distant cluster rather than as a group of individuals. We weren't in the same classes, didn't ride the same bus to school, didn't congregate in the same places on school grounds, didn't go home to the same neighborhoods. Sports provided the meeting ground in *Remember the Titans*; but I was on my school's football, basketball, and track teams, and don't recall any African American teammates in my two years at Edison, although the varsity basketball team did have one outstanding African American player, who was beloved as long as he was scoring points and blocking shots. The school's exterior might have become integrated. But within the school, segregation was maintained in a variety of ways.

I never heard of violence in the school, but it was a big school and I was only dimly aware of most of what went on there. However, every Monday

morning at the bus stop, the neighborhood boys would compare notes on their weekends. A common boast from my boyhood playmates in relating their weekend activities was: "I went into Alexandria and beat up n*****."

I was never invited to join them and couldn't have beaten up anybody then if I'd wanted to. And my parents wouldn't have let me off the leash enough to allow a trip into the city for even the best of reasons, much less to commit violence on African American people. My father was from the Jewish ghetto of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and my mom was a Brooklyn Catholic. My parents were died-in-the-wool FDR New Dealers, a societal revolution designed to benefit working class families like those my parents came from, if not necessarily African American families (Reed, 2008). Roosevelt's policies made my parents lifelong Democrats who believed in the power of government to help shape a better society. My dad's people were refugees of Eastern European anti-Semitic pogroms, arriving in 1913 and 1916. My paternal grandfather and uncles made a living by painting signs for local businesses. My mom's family were Irish Catholic potato famine refugees on her mother's side, and German Catholic immigrants on her father's. My maternal grandfather was a plumber with barely more than an elementary school education. My parents had grown up surrounded by various bigotries. The matter-of-fact name for Brazil nuts in my mother's family of origin, for instance, was "N*****'s Toes." Their lives were hardly the product of bias-free environments.

Nor was my own Virginia neighborhood. I heard n***** just about every day growing up, not just at the bus stop. This term was applied liberally to people we rarely actually saw, even after integration. As a boy, my only contact with African American came on trips to downtown Alexandria or Washington, D.C., where we rode on the front of the bus and they rode in the rear. I had no idea where

the “colored people” or “Negroes”—the polite and respectful terms of the day—lived, only that it wasn’t anywhere near us. That didn’t stop my neighbors from hating the hell out of them. Systemic racism can become interpersonal when its impact begins to shape mundane interactions among people.

Systemic racism often becomes personal. It happened to me when I was very young. I hadn’t yet entered school; I was probably 4 years old, right around the time of the Little Rock school integration. A kid in the neighborhood did something that made me angry. Very angry. So angry that I used the worst word I’d ever heard on him. It was so bad, so horrifying, so blasphemous, that I couldn’t even say it. So I spelled it at him: N-I-G-E-R.

Over sixty years later, I still remember that day, that event, quite vividly, right down to the phonetic spelling. The extraordinary shame I felt in using such a word, even against a neighborhood bully, is what made it so memorable to me. My shame as an adult comes from having used the word as a weapon, albeit against another White boy. At the time, though, I felt ashamed because such a vile profanity had come from my own mouth.

Before beginning school, I already had learned a word of enormous power and dread, knew how to use it, and knew, if only vaguely and by association, whom it was designed to denigrate. This word was so horrific and obscene that I dared not even speak it. If Freire (1968) is right about how people learn the world along with the word, I had already learned

a lot about the world at a very early age: By the time I was four years old, before I had ever even seen an African American person, I’d begun to appropriate a White Supremacist ideology and its lexicon, in particular its most abusive, hateful term.

My Southern heritage neighbors were undoubtedly playing out generations of discrimination at the interpersonal and institutional levels. If I had learned to think that way in spite of the absence of overt bigotry in my home, imagine how deeply engrained, and difficult to question or challenge, such a belief was in the majority of my neighbors, and of anyone else who grew up in a segregated, hateful society, raised by parents whose own values had been shaped by persistent, systemic, overwhelming prejudice going back generations.

“Racism was reinforced in virtually everything surrounding White people whose development through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood was mediated by discriminatory practices.”

Although I find their conduct unforgivable and horrific, I understand how the White supremacists in Little Rock developed such hatred. Racism engrained throughout every public institution and built into the fabric of society makes personal racism a very natural, ordinary, predictable worldview. I have focused on immediate, interpersonal experiences that depict

the effects of growing up within the deep structure of racism in a society characterized by legal, forced segregation. Racism was reinforced in virtually everything surrounding White people whose development through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood was mediated by discriminatory practices. It is not surprising to me that people who grow up surrounded by racism cannot imagine the humanity of those persecuted and oppressed by racist assumptions. What is surprising, and profoundly admirable, is that Elizabeth Eckford found a few White people who sincerely and

consistently believed in, supported, and protected her from the tornadic loathing and abuse she and her fellow color barrier breakers endured daily at Little Rock Central.

I say none of this to excuse the conduct of the students, teachers, administrators, police, community members, state governor, and many others who acted so violently against the Little Rock Nine. Rather, I relate this narrative to share how I grew up in a less insular environment of racism and hate than was available across the Deep South, and still experienced its effects. I can easily see how people without parents like mine—who, if not leading the charge toward civil rights, at least didn't join its opposition—in communities much farther from the citadel of democracy in Washington, D.C. than our northern Virginia home, could accept and perpetuate racism. It is possible to understand how such beliefs develop without condoning them.

Overt discrimination, microaggressions, and systemic forms of prejudice continue to characterize everyday life for people of color, including those who have succeeded financially and in their professions. People of color are subjected to subtle,

yet legally powerful forms of prejudice such as redlining that prevents African American people from getting loans, gerrymandering that reduces their voting power, fraudulent voter fraud alarms designed to limit African American people's voting rights, and so much more (see Lipsitz, 1998, for a numbing account of such methods, all alive and well in our contemporary society). Eckford's story might be old, and its setting in mid-20th century would fit with the narrative that racism happened a long time ago, in a place far away. But it's also very current, very present, and very urgent as one of today's most pressing social challenges.

I have attempted to relate how systemic racism that shapes everyday social life played a role in my own ideological formation. My intention has not been to hijack Eckford's story or to position her tormentors sympathetically, but to account for the ways in which the White Little Rock residents came to be so hateful. I encourage other people sharing my demographic profile to reflect similarly on how their beliefs have come into being, to become accountable for their own role in modern-day racism, and to think of ways to help create more equitable environments for forthcoming generations.

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