

27 Equality and Sorority during the Decade after *Brown*

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I learned that my elementary school was racially segregated when a television newscaster announced that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled for the petitioners in *Brown v. Board of Education*. It never occurred to me before May 17, 1954, that there were no white teachers or students at my school. For almost ten years my parents shielded me from the ugly reality of de jure segregation—as Guido Orefice, the father in the Italian film *Life Is Beautiful*, shielded his son from the horrors of Nazism.

Nothing immediately changed for me after that day. My parents never mentioned the decision. To discuss the implications of *Brown* would undo their hard work shielding me from the psychologically debilitating experience of U.S. race-based apartheid.

The public schools in my Southern hometown, Washington, D.C., desegregated the following fall. I arrived at school in September 1954 to find many of my schoolmates gone. They were now attending formerly white schools closer to their homes. Gone too was our annual celebration of Negro History Week, as well as our May Day celebration. Nevertheless, my elementary school, Neval Thomas, remained all black due to racially restrictive residential patterns. Some school systems, anticipating the ruling in *Brown*, started building new schools deep within single-race residential areas; others adopted this tactic after the *Brown* decision.

Desegregation did bring us new opportunities. My school was selected to appear on a local television show where elementary school children visit and report on historical sites in and around the city. The school was assigned the Custis-Lee Mansion, the home of General Robert E. Lee! Although none of the teachers said anything to us directly, I distinctly remember hearing them talk among themselves about the insult imposed on us by having to visit the home of a Confederate general.

I was among the students selected to appear on the show, and I remember our visit to the mansion, which still had slave quarters. My sheltered background did not allow me to fully appreciate the horror of the quarters. Instead,

I remember commenting that the slaves must have been very small to have lived in such low cramped places. After the visit I lost interest in the assignment and was bumped from the group for not preparing my part. To this day I do not know whether subconsciously I realized our assignment was terribly inappropriate, or whether my teacher's lack of enthusiasm wore off on me.

Despite the desegregation of Washington's public schools after *Brown*, I did not attend an integrated school until junior high school. *Browne* Junior High was only nominally integrated when I arrived in the fall of 1956 and quickly became all black again. The children of Jewish merchants who serviced the community, and of the few working-class whites who remained in the area, quickly left the school by the following fall. Their flight from *Browne* and the neighborhood mirrored white flight from public schools and urban areas around the country in the post-*Brown* era. The only white person left in my junior high school was the band teacher, a nice man who introduced me to the French horn.

When I entered Georgetown's Western High School in the fall of 1958, I found myself in an integrated school where blacks were in the minority. The students came from varied backgrounds; children of Congress members, cabinet officials, and diplomats mingled with children from Chinatown and children of the genteel poor, writers, artists, civil servants, black domestics, and black professionals. Other than a classmate from Texas who commented in gym that she had been taught that black people had tails, high school life was fairly conventional. There were the usual cliques. The high school sororities and fraternities excluded black students, which I expected, and Jewish students as well.

I remember walking down the hall behind two affluent white sorority girls who were speaking openly and unashamedly in derogatory terms about some Jewish students I knew. To my surprise they continued their discussion knowing I could overhear them. Patricia Williams writes about the simultaneous horror and delight of being allowed to overhear and be a passive party to such conversations. In a sense you are allowed to be a party to the "othering" of someone else. Rather than feeling like a member of the in-group, I felt invisible, not important enough for people to act civil in my presence.

I had only one black teacher in high school, a woman with a PhD who taught me biology. Her advanced degree was not unusual at Western High School. There were several other women teachers at the school with PhDs, most in the sciences. Only later in life did I realize that sex discrimination in higher education probably caused me to have such highly trained teachers in high school. Those women teachers with doctorate degrees probably could not get jobs in any of the area colleges or universities.

Unlike elementary and junior high, in high school I encountered teachers and counselors who harbored low expectations of black students. When

my mother asked my French teacher why I got a C when the college-level tutor my parents hired said my comprehension of French was excellent, the teacher replied: "Why are you concerned? She's not going to college anyway." My mother told me many years later that she drew herself up to her full five feet three and a half inches and told the teacher that she, my father, my paternal grandfather, and my great-grandfather were college graduates. I never got a C in French after that conversation.

Senior year when I received a letter from the University of Pennsylvania asking me to submit my portfolio of drawings to the Museum School, my counselor advised me not to respond since I already had been admitted to Syracuse University. At the time, my father was on a Fulbright in Japan and my mother was not knowledgeable, so there was no one to counsel me otherwise. I was only sixteen, so I took the counselor's advice. Belatedly, I learned that white teachers and counselors could not always be trusted.

I came of age in post-World War II America, with pictures of the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and of the survivors of Nazi concentration camps planted firmly in my memory. Naively, I thought that we had learned important lessons about tolerance from these experiences. But, high school taught me that discrimination came in all forms—race, religion, ethnicity, income, gender, sexuality, ideology—and was not limited to black Americans.

Life seemed decidedly less beautiful by the time I entered college seven years after *Brown*. In college I learned that integration could isolate you from your own community as well. Granted, in high school the few black students were separated by class, so isolation from the early 1960s overwhelmingly working-class black community in Syracuse was not totally surprising. A few people within that community were especially kind to the small number of black university students, unlike the sole black professor at the university. In hindsight, as a college professor myself, I realized how overwhelmed he must have felt sitting untenured in his attic-like office at a white university. What really surprised me was how acceptance by certain white institutions could isolate you from your fellow black students.

Out of a combination of curiosity and pragmatism, I entered spring rush, the annual effort by sororities and fraternities to select new members from the freshman class. Syracuse offered women three options: you could rush Christian sororities, Jewish sororities, or both ("mixed" rush). At the time, there were no black sororities or fraternities on campus. A few black women and I chose mixed rush, thinking it our only opportunity to see all the sorority houses. In the end I was selected by two sororities, a local sorority and a national Jewish sorority. Two years earlier another Jewish sorority had broken the color barrier, admitting an accomplished and attractive black woman who also was the girlfriend of a nationally prominent black college football player. Ever the pragmatist, I chose the Jewish sorority because it was more prestigious and,

more importantly, offered better housing and food than the local sorority. That decision cut me off both physically and emotionally from the few other black students at the university, most of whom spent all their college lives in dorms.

It was difficult trying to function in both worlds. Each had its own orthodoxy. You were part of one or the other, but not of both.

Belatedly I learned that my race had been the subject of so much concern among the sorors that the national office was consulted before I was asked to join the sorority. This fact was hidden from me by the senior and junior sorors, who warmly welcomed me. In hindsight I wonder about the reaction of the women who formed my pledge group. Surely they did not expect to have a black soror. The full implication of this fact became apparent the next year.

In the early 1960s Syracuse randomly assigned roommates, and I ended up my freshman year with an Italian American woman from Scarsdale. I did not understand why my mother remained sitting nervously on my bed until my roommate and her family arrived. My mother knew, but my father never mentioned to me, that as a student at Northwestern University in the 1920s he was not permitted to stay in the dormitory because he was black. When my roommate arrived and everyone was civil, even friendly, my mother breathed a sigh of relief and left.

I detected no problems between me and my roommate until I returned from Christmas vacation and found that I had been shifted to a single room. No one in authority spoke to me about this change, and my roommate lamely commented that she and the white woman from northeast Pennsylvania who previously occupied the single had decided to room together. Lee, my roommate, could never fully look me in the face again. It is one thing to attend classes together, but another altogether to share the same living space with a black girl.

My sophomore year roommate, a Jewish woman from my pledge class, failed to arrive. No one bothered to tell me that she had decided not to return to school. Once again I had a single room. That spring room selections were made for the sorority house. I had first choice for my class because two senior women brought me into the house during the spring semester after their roommate graduated in January. Despite my having picked a prime room and being on friendly terms with my sorors, no one volunteered to room with me. After an embarrassing moment of silence, I was asked to leave for a bit while my "sisters" spoke among themselves. When I returned, room selection was complete and I had two roommates I vaguely knew from my pledge class. The incident was never discussed again. I was expected to go on as before and forget that the incident ever occurred. I was to assume that I was an equal like all of the other "sisters." It is hard to forget those things.

That fall, my junior year, the closeness between my two roommates left me feeling like an outsider in my own room. They got to live in the sorority

house together in exchange for having to room with me; they, like me, were pragmatists. Recently I saw both women together at the Baltimore train station. It seemed clear that they thought they recognized me too, but we did not speak to each other. I know why I did not speak to them, but I wonder why they chose not to speak to me.

Things were a bit better my third year. I roomed with two juniors. Unlike my pledge group, their class joined the sorority knowing that they'd have a black soror.

Overall my experiences at Syracuse were positive. I got a good education, was very active in campus politics, and even got elected to a class office. Yet, I did not realize how bitter my experiences at Syracuse left me until many years later when I was asked to return for a reunion. My bitterness stems not from these and other racially tinged incidents, but rather from the refusal of people to be honest about the prejudices apparent during that period. They were too willing to paper over their own racism and expect you to overlook and forget it as well. People want to think well of themselves, and when their actions reflect racial prejudices, they are embarrassed and ashamed. No one seemed to think about my feelings. Access to some of the benefits long denied blacks was my reward.

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