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of
Civil Rights and Racial Prejudice*

by

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for

University Honors Department

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History**

One Woman's Saga – 50 Years of Civil Rights and Racial Prejudice

Everyday is a day one lives in history. Sometimes I wonder how I managed to get to where I am today. Oh, I don't mean in a career or family or even in a place. I wonder where or how I got to the point in my history in which I chose to love my black brothers and sisters. Surely, one's church may preach the love as parents teach love, but so many people prefer to hate, call names and even kill their brothers and sisters. They can choose to face their experiences head-on and overcome them. How has it been possible for me to do that having been reared in the south in the 1950s and 1960s? This is my true story.

Born in 1944 to parents from up north, Mother from Montana, Daddy from New Jersey, I spent my formative and young adult years in Houston, Texas. In 1979, I moved to the Denver area, then in 1988 moved to southern Illinois where I live now. I know many things influenced my beliefs, the Christian church, parents and places I've lived, but I cannot put down on paper any single thing that leads to how I feel about my black friendships. I do know that race is not an issue for me and to discover why, I relay my experiences.

The first time I remember a situation, a colored situation it was called back then was at a trip to the Houston Zoo at Hermann Park about 1951. I can see it all clearly to this day. Mother, my sister, Olivia, and I were walking alongside the reflecting pool in the center of the zoo heading to the bathrooms—it seemed Olivia needed "to go." We were in our flowered Sunday dresses that tied in the back. Olivia had on her organza pinafore. Mother was wearing a dress too,

but no hat or gloves that Sunday afternoon for the day was warm. For Houston, that meant a temperature under 95 degrees without rain. So it was probably in the high 80s.

As we walked toward the bathrooms, I noticed a lot of well-dressed black women, men and children waiting in line. The women all had on dresses, hats, and most carried gloves. The men had on suit or at least white shirts and were fanning themselves with hats. Their kids were in their Sunday best. They were waiting for the bathroom too. I noticed they were all waiting for the same one, though. I said to mother in my loudest little girl voice , “Why are they all waiting for the same bathroom? Why does it say ‘Colored’ on the door ? Why can’t they use the women’s and men’s bathrooms. Why does our bathroom say ‘Whites Only’? Why do they all have to use the same bathroom?” By this time every face in line had turned to look at us and watch to see what my mother had to say to my child-honest questions.

What could she say? She hustled me and Olivia, who was whining to go to the bathroom by now, to get out of there. “Never mind,” she said. “let’s go. Daddy is waiting on us.” So as my sister and I held hands, she practically dragged us away toward a bathroom on the other side of the reflecting pool to avoid the situation and have me shush up.

I guess I was shocked. I did not know blacks were treated so shabbily. Mother and Daddy were not Southerners so we did not discuss the coloreds and “their place” in Houston. Mother grew up in the West and Dad in the East, so the 1950s southern culture was new to them as it was to me. And, the usual way to handle a situation was to avoid it. Oh yes, we did have a black maid. Her name was Mamie. She was a large woman, single, with bangs and straightened hair, like Mamie Eisenhower’s I always thought. She rode the bus from downtown out to our house. She used our bathroom and sat at the kitchen table and ate lunch we provided. But come to think of it, she didn’t want to eat at the table with us. She thought her place was to eat

separately, told us so and so she did. Several years later we were to learn that Mamie was proud of our racial views.

The civil rights boycott movement of the mid-1950s seemed to start everything and Houston was not immune to the wave of change. I had forgotten what it was like, the boycott I mean, until I saw the movie '*The Long Walk Home*' with Sissy Spacek as the wife of the white professional man and Whoopi Goldberg as the main black maid. The story so paralleled mother and Mamie that I felt I was living the boycott all over again.

Everyone who has studied even a little bit of American history should know the story of Rosa Parks' refusing to sit at the back of the bus one day in Montgomery, Alabama. Martin Luther King encouraged blacks, who were mostly female maids traveling on buses to white suburbs to work, to boycott the bus system in Montgomery. This boycott spread to other southern cities. Blacks in Houston joined in. Just like in the movie, black men who had cars, and not many did, would drive the maids to downtown where they would normally catch a bus. There the white women who employed them would pick up their maids and drive them to their homes in the whites-only residential sections of town. So when the boycott happened to Mamie, mother became a "driver" for a few weeks. She would drive 45 minutes to downtown to pickup Mamie and bring her out to Iris Lee Lane, our street in Piney Point Village. The name says it all—an all-white upper-middle class, hyphenated neighborhood imitating one of many East Coast's swanky suburbs.

Suffice to say our neighbor across the street needed a maid too. Oh, she didn't have three kids and a husband alive like my mother, but having grown up in southern Louisiana the granddaughter of former slave owners, she couldn't be operating her household without "Help." So mother became the driver for her maid as well as the others who worked on Iris Lee. By the

end of the boycott, she was picking up 3 or 4 maids a couple of times a week. But downtown, she was not heckled too much and Daddy let her continue. I often think that unlike the Montgomery boycott with their white male hecklers, Houston men were more concerned with their wives than race. And of course Houston women knew they needed to keep the family and house in good order for their oil-business husbands. So, having Help was more important than racial views. And they knew their maids needed their pay to live on and they did not want to lose their maids.

While Houston's black women were winning seats on the buses, many black men were doing sit-ins at lunch counters formerly denied to them. For the most part, public facilities were trying to change, but it was slow. Real change did not occur until the 1960s when change became upheaval.

I first remember the John F. Kennedy (JFK) Presidential election as the beginning of this upheaval. He came to Houston to speak in 1960. My mother, The Driver, had became known as a bit of a sympathizer without southern attitudes. My dad had to hide any Democratic leanings in a Republican-ruled oil town. So they could only leave Iris Lee and go see JFK speak at the Houston Auditorium after it started. You see, they did not want the neighbors know where they were going and they thought if they left late for it, neighbors wouldn't know they were going to the speech. At least, that's what they told me and Mamie later on.

When it came to supporting JFK, that had to be hidden as well. For instance, they kept a picture of him from a *Parade Magazine* cover inside one of our cupboard doors so that if a neighbor dropped by they wouldn't see it. Of course, two people who were like part of the family did see the picture on a regular basis—Mamie and our long-term milkman. I still remember the whoop-and holler the milkman let out when he saw JFK in the cupboard as he

went to get a glass for a drink of water. He was so excited that we liked him. He said that all of our neighbors talked about how they hated the “nigger-loving Catholic” who was running for President. He was proud of the E’mdahl family! He knew my dad couldn’t stand up or he would lose business as an independent oilman, but he knew Mom and Dad were going to vote right. Mamie said that she and her people were real proud about it too. That picture stayed inside the cupboard door until it got yellow, greasy, faded and fell apart about 1971. Oh, how I wished I had saved it!

There are always incidents of people hiding the right attitudes but unable to stand up in public. But just the opposite situation occurred not long after the JFK election—a prominent person producing the right attitudes publicly, but not standing up in private. The Houston Public Schools were one of the big city schools under federal orders to desegregate in the 60s. The federal district judge, Ben Connally ordered the desegregation because the Houston system did not do it voluntarily. He was the father of a school friend of mine Louise Connally. Louise and I were in fifth and sixth grades together. When we went to junior high, Louise went to an exclusive private school instead. All white, of course. The judge could integrate the large Houston Public School system, but not his daughter.

I too went to a public school that was all white. For some reason, desegregation did not come to our suburban school district while I was there, either. I would have liked to have met and to have gotten to know some of my black peers. I continued to live segregated with my parents until going to college at the University of Texas-Austin (UT).

As a green-eyed seventeen year old full of idealism at UT in 1962, I thought that everything would come together at college including desegregation. It didn’t. Racism followed me there. Innocent me. It crept up when I least expected it.

In Austin, I roomed in a girl's boarding house. Three of us from my high school lived there and we were all friends. One day on campus one of the girls, Sheryl Mitchell and I met a black man at the Student Union. Since Sheryl and I had no fear and wanted *Knowledge, with a capital K*, we asked him some general questions. Embarrassed to talk to us in public, he suggested we go outside and avoid the stares of white students passing by us. Once outside, we agreed to meet for coffee that evening after dinner. He agreed to come to our boarding house later and we planned to walk to a nearby coffee shop.

After dinner, as Sheryl and I were getting ready to go out, the man arrived at our boarding house door. And I say man, as Sheryl and I were still teenagers at 17 and 18, respectively, and he was an old 25-year-old. Normally, male friends and dates were allowed to wait in the round parlor or entry with the beautiful oak stairwell in the 1885 house. He came to the house and rang the doorbell.

No, no, no! Our house mother, who also owned the house, would not let him in, for any reason. She stormed up the stairs to our rooms and told us under no uncertain terms was he allowed in her house! Stupid me, I asked, "Why?" "You know why and don't ask again. It will never happen!" she screamed. Then, she stormed back downstairs as we ran down behind her pleading to let him in. It didn't work and we had to make him wait outside, rudely, in the heat in a nice black suit with a long-sleeved white shirt underneath and silk tie. Of course, he sensed what had happened when we went outside—he probably heard it all as well. We did meet him, but pretty much agreed not to go anywhere. He did not want us in trouble because of him. We just walked around while we talked to him about his major, his hometown, and the like. And, we discussed prejudice.

He started out by saying he was surprised that we had asked him to our boarding house. He was used to the “treatment” he said, i.e. being unwelcome for being black and certainly not welcome to visit with white girls. When I asked him why he wore a suit, he stated that blacks who endeavor to get a college education had to dress up or they would not get any respect. In fact, wherever they went they had to dress up more than the whites so they would not look subservient. All the black male students, he said, wore suits. As he spoke, I remembered the zoo with the dressed up people standing in line to share the one bathroom. And I remembered Mamie who rode the bus in her good clothes, hat and shoes and changed into her white or black maid’s uniform (depending upon the seasons) when she got to our house and changed again before she left it. Even then, blacks were not expecting much from us whites, but seemingly little things like how they dressed and presented themselves was very important to their sense self-worth. The next year would be the one that would set the pace for the arrival of black dignity.

The most poignant memories I have of the civil rights movement occurred the next year, 1963. I was home on college break when Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I Have A Dream Speech.” I watched it with the family on our black-and-white television. I could hear how he felt, deep inside. His resonant voice waved with “I have a dream...” and sang “We Shall Overcome.” I can still see him clearly in black-and-white. He was moving. Little did we know at that time he would receive the Nobel Peace Prize, as we expected that violence would be the rule of the day despite Dr. King’s promises of non-violence. The press seemed ready for violence in their anxious, high-pitched news accounts of the day. And mother really believed that 100 years after the Emancipation was not enough time for people to see blacks as equals. “They will need another 100 years,” she said. I hoped not.

As those early sixties news hounds predicted, the latter part of the sixties would change America forever. For me, changes in my life included marriage in 1965 then having a baby girl in 1966 and baby boy in 1968. I watched the news a lot, but it was probably a mistake. As I look back now, sometimes I think I suffer from at least partial post-traumatic stress syndrome because of what I saw on TV and read in the newspaper: The Selma to Montgomery march and efforts to pass the Voting Rights Act, assassination of Malcolm X, Detroit riots, Muhammad Ali and the long Vietnam war. Then, Martin Luther King and Robert F Kennedy were shot in 1968. It was a tough, anxious time to start a family. But I was ready to participate in the process beginning with exercising my right to vote.

I did this in 1966 for the first time. I remember that in 1965 the Federal government ordered Texas to eliminate the poll taxes or any other requirement to vote and in 1966 Texas took the issue to the Supreme Court. For many years, southern states did what they could to restrict or prevent blacks from voting. Even after the Voting Rights Act , some states continued to do business as usual. I remember I had \$2.00 in hand as I waited in line to vote, but no reference is made to money on the Poll Tax Exemption Certificate form I still have in my personal historical papers. In fact it reads as though I was exempt from paying a poll tax and doesn't mention the \$2.00 even though Texas still collected it in various places.

I have several other items of interest pertaining to racism in those years. They are things you do not think about much at the time and I am not sure why I saved them other than I must have had an unconscious sense of history in the making at the time. For instance, I saved an honorary *Yankee License to Enter the South Passport* given to me by my husband's Arkansas relative. It demands that I post one copy on my windshield and "do not participate in freedom

rides.” Probably the most interesting item I saved as it turns out now is the program from the Mohammed Ali fight with Ernie Terrell.

In 1967, Cassius Clay—pardon me, he had only recently changed his name to Mohammed Ali--came to Houston to train for the fight in the Astrodome. He really liked Houston with its laid back, friendly black population who were so respectful of black athletes. He decided he wanted to move to Houston permanently. But that was just the start of his troubles. He picked the most exclusive area of town in which he wanted to purchase a house—River Oaks. No one gets a home there without social or “old money” connections. And old money was white, not black. Fair housing had nothing to do with River Oaks where the establishment voted whether or not one could move in there. Not only was he black, but he had turned Muslim and had a new foreign-sounding name that people did not understand. I almost have to laugh today, 36 years later, that the press and public officials revere Ali as an American hero. In 1967, they scorned him as a Vietnam War draft-dodger, believed he should go to prison for avoiding the draft due to his religious beliefs, and reported delightfully that he was voted out of an exclusive all-white southern neighborhood. Clearly he was ahead of his time as many of us were to believe later that Vietnam should have been dodged. And, Ali is probably the greatest boxer the world has ever seen despite the press. I was privileged to see him fight in the Astrodome and glad that I saved the program to prove it. Fortunately for his career his draft dodging sentence was reversed your years later in 1971.

By the way, he was the forerunner of other black athletes taking their place in integrating Houston neighborhoods. A few years later, Elvin Hayes, a former University of Houston and Rockets basketball star moved around the corner from my parents home next to a white judge. It

gave the neighbors something to talk about that my mom and dad were afraid to give to them when they sneaked out to see JFK. What goes around, comes around.

Finally it came around to me. “It” being *prejudice*. *Prejudice against me because I am a white woman*. I was to experience it for the first and only time in the early 70s. My husband worked with a nice young black man, Don and we had dinner at each other’s house several times with him and his wife Katy. We shared a lot in common as many people do as newly-marrieds with young children or a baby on the way. Invited to Katy’s baby shower, I was warned by my husband that her sister would be there and she “hated all white people with a passion.” I thought, “but who could hate me?” Dumb. I was white. That was all it took. During the shower she whispered with her girlfriends, stared at me and blatantly asked Katy, “Why is SHE here?” Yes, I was very uncomfortable. So was Katy who apologized for her. Nevertheless, I stayed for the whole thing: games, gift unwrapping, cake and ice cream. I wasn’t going to kow-tow to her prejudices. I think Katy respected me for it.

In the late 70s, 80s and 90s I was to learn more about relationships as I moved to the Denver, Colorado area, remarried, then moved to southern Illinois. I was finally to see relationships between blacks and whites become more racially tolerant. The people of the West are hardy, independent, and respectful of one who takes care of himself. Color doesn’t matter as much there as western states never had slavery, nor measured relationships based on race. There was rarely problem in working relationships between blacks and whites. My second husband and I, Tim, had a few black acquaintances, and one black couple as friends with whom we socialized. It was not big deal and for awhile I thought everyone had grown up and cooled off since the 60s. I was right about Denver and the West, but I was wrong about my next station—southern Illinois.

After 10 years or so, Tim and I moved to Franklin County, IL. This is an almost all-white county steeped in 1930-1950s southern attitudes. In fact, the Klu Klux Klan rallied in Benton in the early 1990s in the daylight. At night, who knows what happens. But we were told that so-and-so who had a black caretaker “found his house burned down one night.” Scared me. I was afraid for neighbors to find even a moving company or appliance repairman at my house who was black. I didn’t know what the parameters for burning were in Benton and I did not care to find out! I was glad when we moved to Williamson County and I began work at a church-related social service agency. I figured that there should be more of an inclusive attitude toward race as that is part of the mission of the agency for healing, justice and wholeness.

Yes and no. While the agency hires black employees and serves black clients, the southern Illinois racial prejudices rise up too when you least expect them. As part of my duties as an office manager, I was required to hire a part-time secretary in the agency’s Cairo, Illinois, office, an area with a predominately black population. During the interview process the southern gentleman who owned the building recommended a young, white woman for the job. At his insistence, I gave her an interview. After the interview, he gave me more recommendations and reasons for hiring her. I found her not to be as qualified as several of the black women I interviewed. In fact, their education—they each had associate degrees and excellent secretarial skills—and their work experience was far better than the white candidate. It did not dawn on me until much later after I hired Ann, the best-prepared black candidate, that the building owner was really using his authoritative white power attitude to affect the outcome of my decision. It was a first for me, but not the last. I would be challenged again about hiring black workers.

Before that challenge came, I was privileged to get to know Ann well. Ann and I became good friends over the years. She was not only a good secretary, but she moved to a full-time position as a case aide for foster care work. She is honest, hardworking, and intelligent. She speaks straight to the point and has a great sense of humor. She knows her town and her clients and works very hard for empower them to provide the foster kids and caretakers a better life free of all types of abuses. Her character is of the highest quality and I value her friendship greatly to this day.

Our friendship became a gradual thing. Often as I could, I would travel to Cairo to train, supervise or review Ann's work before she became a case aide. I enjoyed the company of the agency's Cairo workers and their direct approach to life. I enjoyed see the beautiful old homes, historical buildings and the miracle of the two rivers, the Ohio and Mississippi coming together. After Ann was promoted, I continued to travel there to work with other secretaries. Ann and I always tried to have lunch together. We usually brought food back to the office. Cairo and nearby Charleston, Missouri, with their great BBQ and fried catfish to this day frown on blacks and whites eating a meal together. I knew she was as uncomfortable with the staring eyes, as was I, when we went out together or in a group with other agency personnel. But we enjoyed our lunches back at the office.

Over time, I got to know Ann's story. She came from a large family, lost a brother in Vietnam and another was murdered by white fishing buddies. The murder trial was moved out of Cairo across the river as it seems the boat on which they were all on when the death occurred was closer to the Kentucky side of the Ohio. The buddies got off—no sentence, no jail time. And Ann knows why-- because the perpetrators were white. This event in her life was to make her bitter and hate whites for a long time. Who could blame her? Its only through conversation,

and not being afraid of asking personal questions, that I was able to learn this story. I often think that my genuine caring attitude and not speaking with a white woman's forked tongue enabled us to form a friendship. Possibly we are friends because we are both part American Indian. I believe it was not easy for her to trust me at the time. I understood her feelings.

This understanding has given me the confidence to work one-on-one with anyone. As it turns out I hired other black women as secretaries at the agency and black student workers when I went to work at Southern Illinois University Carbondale in 1998. Oh, it has not been smooth at the University either where one would expect education would override prejudice. I expected it in 1962. I demand it now. Coworkers have referred to my student works Shauna and Larry as "your girl" and "Lynne's homeboy." [How rude, I say!] They are both hard workers, intelligent, and nice. Their manners go a lot farther in this world than do people with prejudices.

What I have learned as I reflect on my experiences over the last 50 years, is that there are simple keys to unlock the doors of prejudice and race relations. I have learned that the most basic key is that of communication with one another. By being willing to talk to black brothers and sisters, learn about their lives and get together socially on a personal level, I have been able to have very good friendships. In business I have learned to be willing to interview, hire and accept black co-workers rather than avoiding do so as has been done by my family role models. I have conquered the fear of color that was so prevalent in my parent's generation and those generations before them, for there is nothing of which we need to be afraid.

A second key is being a proactive person, that is , acting out your beliefs. I have been willing to be a "Driver" in the workplace as my mom did during the 50s, despite pressure from others to not hire black workers. When voting, I've tried to make sure candidates reflect my values. There is no reason to hide personal politics behind a cupboard door today. In business, I

recognize black values and their contributions that makes business work well, honesty and straight-forwardness. Finally, in real estate, everyone can throw away doubts. Color does not lower property values, prejudices do. If Mohammed Ali lived next door to me today, how much more would my house be worth? A lot, I'm sure.

A third key and one that is very important to the future of eliminating racial prejudices is the attitude you teach your children. My children have gone to integrated schools and made black friends. While they may not have had my experiences during the 50s and 60s during segregation and the fight for equality, they have been able to accept people without regard to color. You see, prejudice is learned not born into our children.

Sometimes standing up is easier said than done. For me it has been hard to do so when an older family member or co-worker uses inappropriate racial slurs. When that has happened, have I lost an opportunity to speak up? You bet. Do I regularly call or email my friends? If not, I can and I will.

As we go through life we have many experiences, good and bad. As we deal with them we can reflect and choose how we want to act. I have learned to not avoid the situation, hide behind cupboard, nor to have fear about friendships. I have learned to hire proactively my black brothers and sisters. I have learned what to teach my children to help them eliminate prejudicial attitudes. It is a matter of this, we all must overcome prejudices by turning exclusion into inclusion, one act of faith at a time.