

Pride and Prejudice

By Jesse Douglas Allen-Taylor

In the winter of 1981 or thereabouts, I was sitting on a box of bottled liquor in Lamar Dawkins' package store in Orangeburg, South Carolina, talking with Mr. Dawkins about Strom Thurmond. Mr. Thurmond was much on our minds because of his recent announced opposition to renewal of the Voting Rights Act, and we were planning a series of protests across the state against the old unreconstructed segregationist and United States Senator.

I was trying to get a fix on Mr. Thurmond's character for strategy purposes from Mr. Dawkins, who was a native South Carolinian and a longtime civil rights leader. Somewhere along the way he remarked that Mr. Thurmond, you know, had a black daughter.

Although this was years before the Essie Mae Washington revelations made the national news, I'd heard such stories about Mr. Thurmond before—heard, in fact, that he had several black half-brothers living in Aiken, on the Georgia border. But you always heard such stories about white Southern politicians—the more segregationist and anti-black the politician, the more outrageous the stories—but so far, despite all of my inquiries, no-one had ever provided more than speculation. Mr. Dawkins, however, was not one to speculate.

“How do you know Strom Thurmond had a black daughter?” I asked him.

“Because she used to board with us, when she went to South Carolina State,” he answered.

“How do you know it was Thurmond's daughter?”

“Because he used to come and visit her.”

By that time, I had been working full-time in the African-American Freedom Movement for 15 years, most of them in the Deep South, some of them fighting directly against Strom Thurmond. I had been studying race and racism in America since my high school days. I had come of age on the West Coast watching Mr. Thurmond and other anti-black politicians on television rail against civil rights, accompanied by stories and images of the related torture deaths and church bombings and police beatings

against demonstrators and black neighborhoods. My image of anti-black racism was one of white people who hated African-Americans, didn't want us around them, and beat us or murdered us if we got too close. And yet, I went home that night after my conversation with Lamar Dawkins, marveling at how little I actually knew about the subject. Race and racism were far too complicated to be painted in black and white.

After Strom Thurmond died and Essie Mae Washington came forward with the revelation that she, indeed, was the African-American daughter who the Senator had fathered, most of the talk centered upon the scandalous shame of it—a man who hated “Black People” lying in bed with a black woman to produce a child. For my part, I always saw the other side as well, a white man who so loved his black daughter that he risked exposure—and political scorn and ridicule, possibly the loss of office and all the related power—to visit her during her college days.

I wonder, sometimes, what Thomas Jefferson actually felt when he looked across the grounds at Monticello and saw the children he had fathered through Sally Hemmings, the woman who he professed to “own” in chattel slavery. Did he feel shame at having laid down with a daughter of Africa, or pride of parentage, or some complicated combination of the two? For my part, I risk scorn and ridicule from my African-American brethren every time I bring this side of the issue up. As with all nations and all peoples, we like to serve our enemies up uncomplicated. It makes them easier to skewer.



“Great To Be A Negro”

But that is ever the contradiction of race in America, isn't it? So integral a weaving inside the American fabric, race is the source of both our greatest shame and some of the things about us most to be admired. Race and racism. The two sometimes run together, like two parallel creeks, so close that sorting them out, and picking our way through the racial morass, is sometimes too difficult a task for the nation to take on. And so, too often, we simply let them flow and find their own way, to the good or the bad end, depending on their own whim.

Because of the nation's soiled and sordid history surrounding race—slavery, the obliteration of the Native American nations, the lynchings, the burning of Chinese communities, and the sometimes-violent prejudice against Mexican immigrants—much of the progressive community often sees the issue as a problem to be ferreted out and obliterated.

But that ain't necessarily so, as the old Porgy And Bess refrain used to go. Or, more properly, there is a different side of the racial equation to be considered.

In the early 60s, when it used to be the premier and highly-influential national African-American social and political photo-and-article magazine, *Ebony* used to run a center-spread editorial every month. Sometime in 1964, I remember them publishing a picture of a dark-skinned African-American man in a white shirt, sunshaded, smiling broadly into the camera (an intelligent, confident smile, not the old simpleton buck-and-wing toothy grin that used to be the staple of the minstrel shows), and, unaccountably, a white handkerchief draped across his head, as if he was out in the sun somewhere having a ball, and was trying to ward off the sun's rays. The title of the accompanying editorial, set out in a bold headline,

was “It's Great To Be A Negro.” I remember nothing about the editorial, but I will never forget the picture or the headline. It was published in that period when African-Americans were still knee-deep in the pool of imposed black self-hatred flowing out of slavery times, and there were still people around who could remember when “coon, coon, coon, I wish my color would fade” was the refrain to a popular song (“coon” being one of the early disparaging acronyms for African-Americans).

The *Ebony Magazine* “Great To Be A Negro” photo-editorial presaged the Black Pride era that exploded in the mid-60s, capped by the great James Brown anthem, “Say It Loud, I'm Black And I'm Proud,” which reverberated in black communities across the country.

For many of my fellow African-Americans, that is what we think of—in part—when we think of “race,” a source of pride and comfort and safety and belonging. It is not an issue of being exclusionary, or even of being antagonistically competitive, but of being part of one of the many, sometimes intersecting, social and human circles that are the nature of human beings to construct. This summer, on the 4th of July we held our annual gathering of friends and family to eat barbecue and listen to good music and trade stories. Later, we held our semi-annual family reunion, to which friends were not invited. Does this mean we have abandoned our friends who are outside the family? Certainly not. It only means that this is simply a different circle of belonging.

“Thank God for the Niggers”

It is the same way, I believe, that most African-Americans—as well as most ethnic and racial minorities in the nation—view their membership in and



association with their respective ethnic and racial groups.

Unfortunately, that is not always the case with the majority white population and that, it seems, is one of the major sources of the, sometimes bitter, conflict swirling around race and racism in America.

Too often, white pride is not connected so much with white uplift but with non-white oppression, such as in the story old black Southerners used to tell about poor white folks and the “thank God for the niggers” syndrome. A white political leader once went through the Mississippi backwoods, so the story went, trying to stir the poor white folks up and get them to do something about their horrendous economic condition. “Look at y’all!” the politician thundered, “You’re most at the bottom on everything that counts. Healthcare. Sanitation. Life expectancy. Wages.” At each category he called out, however, the crowd shouted back, “Thank God for the niggers!” Puzzled, the politician asked a local after the meeting for the meaning. “This ain’t no nigger-loving territory, is it?” he asked. “No,” the local shot back, “but if it wasn’t for the niggers, we’d sure-enough be on the bottom of every one of them things you was up there talking about.”

“I’m White and I’m Proud”

For many white folks, however, race itself has now become the problem, with an odd convergent agreement on the left and the right that it ought to be eliminated in American life. Many white conservatives believe that the concept of race should be eliminated because it is too often turned into a tool used by otherwise unqualified minorities to vault them-

selves into positions they don’t deserve and responsibilities they can’t fulfill. Many white progressives, on the other hand, believe that race should be eliminated because it is a pariah, and is a barrier to a more egalitarian, multi-cultural world of diversity and common humanity.

Myself, I think the concept of humanity is far too big a meal to take on in one big bite, and we have to approach it in easier stages, in smaller portions. One of those portions is race, and if we use that in which to forge a greater understanding of and participation in the human race, then it is a positive thing. If it is used in a negative way, as a bludgeon with which to beat down all those who do not look or sound or act or smell exactly like us, then it is a negative.

This year’s American presidential contest, with the election of the first African-American president in our history, revealed a lot about ourselves, some of it exemplary, some of it tawdry, mean-spirited, and vicious. Race has a way of doing that. It is at the core of our humanity, one of the ways in which we practice the distinctly human habit of defining ourselves. Rather than eliminating it—even if it were within our power to do so—we ought to understand and embrace it, neutralizing its bad factors, celebrating and encouraging its good.

I live for the day when my white progressive friends can say aloud, “I’m white and I’m proud.” And they will have a reason, and no one will shun them or laugh at them or ridicule them, least of all their non-white friends, and they will feel no shame. As contradictory as it seems, on that day, I believe, we will be far along on the way towards a united humanity. ■

Photo:

Essie Mae Washington-Williams, Strom Thurmond’s daughter.

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