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SIMPLE WORDS, SIMPLE DEEDS

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In the short time I have been at this predominantly white school, I have found a small minority of racists, equal groups of frauds and interested persons, and a majority of apathetic, uninterested ones. To me, the most contemptible group is the group of frauds, strangely composed of the professed liberals and the ones seeking understanding. It seems odd to me that a once class of racists change due to the presence of one Afro-American.

—Yvonne Criswell¹

Maybe the easiest way to get from the campus of the University of Illinois to Urbana High School is just to walk south on Lincoln Avenue to Washington Street and then east past handsome homes to Race Street, where the large educational plant stands, its entrance facing Carle Park and the arch on its western boundary, its athletic fields in the rear, and its carefully trimmed lawns and evergreens on all sides. The high school has an older substantial section and a new wing marked 1955 on a white foundation stone. Inside the corridors are wide and long, exceptionally long, lined with hundreds and hundreds of numbered lockers, 1407, 1408, 1409, 1410.

At 11:16 in the morning, a bell rings. Students pour out of classrooms and study halls and suddenly the corridors are alive, bubbling, crackling with young people “talking shop,” teasing, shuffling papers into their notebooks, admiring clothes, snatching at books or long hair or at ideas somewhere. The band rehearsal has stopped, and the small society

of about 1,425 students in this three-year senior high school are in motion, practically in flight, except for those who drag to the next class, to the next assignment, to that evening, and to the next day. Homecoming Friday is two days away, October 17, 1969. The football team isn't winning too regularly, but a homecoming queen and her attendants have been selected, and students mutter something about floats and demonstrations.

The bell rings again at 11:21, and where moments ago the very power and music of young people, their exhaustion and elation, relief and mischievousness had splashed down the long, lockered corridors, now there is that familiar sanitary silence of school. The band has reassembled, and, even inside of Principal William Fromm's office, their practiced scales may be heard, tidy and precise. Classes have resumed. The thirty minutes devoted to America's first Moratorium Day are over. The day may now move ahead, as usual.

In his new-wing office of painted cinderblocks, his desk placed beneath a three-box cartoon showing an ingenuous hunter devoured by a wizened lion, Principal William Fromm speaks of the over two hundred students who had failed to come to school that morning and who now presumably were engaged in "that peace deal" sponsored by their University brothers and sisters, their models, their idols: "It's too bad the kids aren't creative enough to do something on their own. They always go to the University where they follow the University students like sheep. . . . Well, maybe it's better than something being upset here." Maybe so. No occurrences in Urbana High School on October 15. Like almost every other American high school on that day, it is peaceful in this "liberal" community where "we'll have a teacher with a beard occasionally."

The official policy of the school on Moratorium Day is political neutrality. One administrator confesses his opposition to the Moratorium: "I can't support it if Hanoi's government and groups who want to overthrow America

support it," but the same man honors the 10:45 to 11:15 period ordered by Urbana Mayor Charles M. Zippodt "for the commemoration of the dead of the war." For Principal Fromm, neutrality, not neutralization, is the word. "If teachers are honest, the students will know their political beliefs. But indoctrinating kids is unethical and probably illegal."

Earlier, Fromm has publicly announced that "any student who leaves the building Wednesday for reasons other than illness will receive an unexcused absence." On this point, the so-called "political" students, most of them presumedly now marching on the "quad," have bitterly opposed him. They have fought back just as they did on the student newspaper censorship "business." "They get elected to the Student Senate and lose their interest in better education, painting student lounges and dress codes. They're interested in Moratoriums and students' rights. They want what they can't have." Then, turning his face away so that he speaks in profile, "it makes it tough on administrators and sponsors."

But they are intelligent, these "activists," these "want-what-they-can't-havers." And while Fromm cannot with good conscience, or any accuracy for that matter, characterize them or the homes from which they come, he is certain of a correlation between "getting along at home and getting along at school." This is for him the control part of the story. There is a sadness part of the story as well, for there are students, he relates, who, finding home impossible and money available, move to apartments near campus in order to be closer to the soul and spirit of what at this moment seems the best next step, and the best alternative to building a sane society. And "if this isn't sad enough for you," then maybe the case of the boy who hasn't seen his father in three months even though they live together in the same house, because the father finds the son's long-haired appearance too ugly, is.

William Fromm's goal is to prepare high school students "for a successful, happy, and productive life when they enter

whatever segment of society they enter after school." This means that regulations and norms like dress codes are set by the styles of employees at local banks, businesses, and Carson, Pirie, Scott & Company. College-bound students, almost 70% of the approximately 425 U.H.S. graduating seniors, must be prepared for ACT tests. They must move ahead in science, foreign languages and math. Here, actually, the University helps the high school by accepting superior students in regular freshmen and sophomore courses. "Society seems to think that everyone should go to college. We know they won't. Some can't. So you have to get some students prepared to go to work." And just like that, just as though the words unleashed lightning, the conversation turns to the racial problems in the school. And just like that, one feels in a sickening metaphor, that fresh sutures have been ripped open, and that few other topics of conversation will be pursued that day. Here it is again, at short last.

"When a student has anxiety about something and wants to hit someone, he'll hit someone of the other race. . . . It's the biggest problem we have . . . and there are fewer immediate solutions we can make." And so there are! And it is the biggest educational problem we have, for this school, like so many others on Moratorium Day as well as non-Moratorium days, on all days, must, in William Fromm's words, "teach what communities want students to learn." And there is no way of knowing what communities want, even with citizens' advisory committees working diligently and honorably on vocational education and school finance. And even if there were ways of knowing a "group's mind," consensus could never be reached, especially on racial attitudes, for these reflect what they call, and what we call, American Pluralism. Good or bad, left or right, center or extreme, rich or poor, there's not going to be consensus here, especially not in a community of working-class blacks and whites, professional whites and blacks, intellectuals, and all the rest of them fighting for what they believe in, fighting perhaps, against

what others depend on. There's not going to be consensus here in the lockered corridors, in the social studies class, in the gymnasium, not even in Carle Park where occasionally students may escape for a few moments to eat their lunch on the grass and smile at the mothers who push their children on the swings or dream quietly to themselves as their children find an enrapturing industry in the sand boxes. Indeed, one probably would do well to treat consensus on race as Whitehead advised treating simplicity in philosophy: "With doubt."

So the evening meetings about education and economy and rules and styles continue, and the caucus discussions grow in intensity with each faction certain that it must resign itself to four steps forward, three steps back. Four forward and three back, and that as they say, is the political tempo of the times, here in Urbana, likewise in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Oakland.

But the race issue is what is always there before and after homecomings, Moratoriums, and the World Series; after Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays and Thanksgiving and Christmas and Halloween. It's race that powers the buses bringing the black students from "the end" (the community's north end) every school morning to one side of the building, and white students from the rest of the Urbana area to the other side. It's race that silences the men who drive these buses and argue that their job is to collect the children once in the morning, deposit them once in the afternoon, and not have to see them on the weekends. The race issue says ten trips per week and no more. And it's the race issue that revs black students in the hall and keeps on the tip of their tongue, ready, handy, the anger and data of racial oppression and injustice. To be sure, some spew "the words" as if they had memorized lessons rather than recalled experience; and others hammer out the rancor and rhetoric in an attempt to achieve a militancy that might catapult them to a selfish yet still useful leadership; and others may slip and refer to

themselves as Negroes while their friends lash back and teach, "black, man, black. Don't forget it. Black." But even to strangers, the crying fright, the recognition of powerlessness, and that uncomprehended bitterness stay on and, by their presence, announce the state and status of race in this one institution:

The treatment of whites and blacks is unequal.

When black girls get pregnant they send them home, but the white girls get to stay. You shoulda seen that Nancy What's-her-name with her belly out to here. Ain't that right?

You better believe it.

The administration doesn't know how to discipline blacks. They let us go too far and then they cut us off.

They won't let us elect a black homecoming queen. They think they've done enough when the attendant is black, or if there's a black cheerleader.

That's right, man.

You know what this is? It's integration and separation at the same time. You dig that?

They keep bringing in all of these indigenous para-professionals. They put us in the dumb tracks, that's why we don't go to college.

They're trying to teach us that we're dumb.

Right on.

You know about tracks? Well, that's what they do.

That's what they do.

They won't let us tutor the black kids who aren't smart. That's why we don't go to college.

That's right. That's right.

He's right.

And several students pitied the administration for its inability or refusal to perceive, as they say, that whereas whites wish to be treated as individuals, blacks want to be

treated as “one black, large group.” At least so these certain students said. But even with a functioning Black Student Alliance, there’s no “black consensus” either. But why should there be?

Why should we all agree? We’re all different, aren’t we?

You think we all look alike, man?

Hey man, let’s get out of here.

Naw. I want to stay and talk.

I don’t trust him. Let’s get out of here!

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait.

Come on, Raymond. We’re shuffling.

Like explosions in a steamy tunnel, black voices and histories, proposals and attitudes literally scintillate in the corridors and small office rooms, even as the peace procession to Champaign’s West Side Park grows in number and purpose, and floods its human tides orderly but persuasively over those “vapid” flat lands many in the East continue to dismiss as “the midwest.”

Is there interracial dating?

Who’s this guy? He from the college?

Sure, they still got some Toms around here.

Yeah. Like Jo-Jo.

What do you mean man, I’d like to find me some rich white man with lots of money.

She would too. She would.

You better believe it, baby. I would.

Random interviews with students and faculty reveal white groups who would side with blacks right down the line, on each and every demand, on each and every complaint. They might even join the corridor skirmishes and join the students

who march with a ferocious pride and arrogance and then, unexpectedly, slam up against one another in an anger and eroticism that not too many hall guards, young or old, are about to restrain. But there are also groups who, as though we didn't know, given half a chance, might bolt from the constraints of public demeanor and spoken promises and fight the black students, their alliance, their names, their habits, and their homes and origins everywhere, and particularly those who live in "the end." And there are groups too, who reveal what a university chaplain on Moratorium Day decries as the greatest sin of all, outright indifference. There is no consensus here. But it also must be known to most by this time that the sophistication and knowledge, alertness and drive found and accepted in more and more young people cannot yet characterize the millions of adolescents who continue to get lumped together as the "younger generation." A Boston area social studies teacher recently told me that while marijuana usage is rampant among his high school students, 75% of a junior civics class had either never heard of Eugene McCarthy, or could not quite place his name in American political history. So sophistication, style, and codified knowledge often come to be subsumed in adventure, rebellion, and compliance, and thereby are mislabeled.

In his old-wing office, Assistant Principal Taylor Thomas, himself a black, admits to the lack of an educational orientation in a black community where night gun battles bring terror to thousands of local citizens and headlines to urban newspapers hundreds of miles away. Last night, two more shootings, two young men dead. Tonight again, perhaps. One of four black staff members, two of whom work in the physical education department, Thomas differentiates between ghetto savvy and academic attainment, knowing full well the label of "Tom" some would throw at him because of this. While he insists that one cannot be proud or ashamed of things "he can neither cause nor cure," in truly primordial tones, he understands the fire and message

of black power, black rage, and black pride. And if he could ever let himself go for just a moment. . . .

If ever racial justice or its determinations fell to anyone, it has fallen to the few black high school administrators who find that they cannot make a move without criticism from one side or the other, old wing or new wing, left or right, black or white, young or old, rich or poor, top or bottom. They must admit finally, to the lack of equal opportunity and the built in "inferiority complex" as they call it and know it, which, as the students will tell you, schools teach along with history and mathematics. But there are also black parents, themselves more knowing in that new way and, probably, prouder or angrier or more confused than ever before, who, like their white counterparts, insist that their children be taken out of remedial and tutorial programs and inserted at levels where the status is better and air cleaner, but where Thomas says, "they're not going to make it." And there are white parents, some more silent, but some more daring than ever before, not at all newcomers to "civil rights," who fear that splashes of publicity may render that political tempi four steps forward, five steps back. Four steps forward, five steps back, maybe because too many people everywhere are still interested in battles and explosions, failures and setbacks, so fragments of success and peace don't seem to carry the impact, the pizzazz they once did. Every day there are more and more facets of being stigmatized and oppressed, and they all seem reasonable, significant, and, of course, worrisome.

Essentially supporting his principal's goals, Taylor Thomas adds societal change as one of his educational ideals as well as a permanent end to that inferiority complex. "You don't get this overnight but I got it whipped now." Getting this far has allowed him to see how inefficiently institutions are run, and this can only enhance one's constantly precarious sense of self. The game can be played by their rules, and still they can be beaten. But the entire swatch of society is going to have to

open up, and, as they're saying more and more now, whatever it means, "let it all hang out." Black people are going to have to drive the big machines on construction jobs, assume foreman positions, and find offices in new wings as well as in old ones. And, really, that's all that is meant by playing them at their game, and winning.

Perhaps it isn't race so much which preoccupies this one school or this one man, for if the world were truly clean and truly free and Assistant Principal Taylor Thomas could have his way and his rightful power, he would "get rid of faculty members who can't relate to any students" with a decency and integrity that being human ought to imply. After all, as dean of male students, he learns more about the teachers and parents who bring in students to be disciplined than he does about the frightened and repenting students, black and white, who daily stand before him awaiting his rulings. But then again, perhaps it *is* race and the hour-by-hour, day-by-day feelings which come without respite, without Moratoriums, from something no one can cause nor cure, but something that hovers all the same in each and every space through which he and about 150 students pass five days a week: "You don't get rid of it until you walk into a white gathering and you're the only black thing, and you're not uncomfortable."

NOTE

1. "Mixed emotions: my year at Wellesley." The quote is taken from *The Searcher*, published by Wellesley High School. It has been reprinted on p. 85 in D. Dwoky (ed.) *How Old Will You Be in 1984?*