

## **Black Lives and Other Matters: A Personal Reflection**

*“To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.” James Baldwin*

I grew up on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi in the 70s and early 80s. I have very vivid memories of my life as it was then. I was the fifth child of eight. My mother and father divorced when I was seven or eight years old. Our family was rich in spirit, but financially poor. I was a scrawny and sickly kid. I had every condition you can think of... asthma, anemia, severe allergies. The condition I suffered most from was the disease of racism. I would not come to fully understand the long-lasting effects and impact of this seemingly incurable national and global pandemic until I matured into adulthood.

I remember vividly the language of racism. My teachers and school friends would say things to me like “...you’re one of the good ones. You’re not like the rest.” I believed them. Why wouldn’t I? Everything around me told me they were right. Of the black boys in my neighborhood, I was one of a couple who excelled in school. None of the black families in my neighborhood including my own, appeared to be successful by worldly standards. It was all at once a source of pride that my white peers and teachers elevated me to this lofty place of “goodness” and a source of subconscious despair knowing that the majority of my race was “no good” and therefore on some level “blackness” was inherently bad.

I learned in school alongside my white classmates that civil rights leader Malcolm X was a “bad guy” because his doctrine of “defend yourself by any means necessary” promoted hatred and violence. We were told that the Japanese were a fierce and violent people bent on victory at all cost. “Victory or Death!”. That’s why the United States had no choice but to remove Japanese Americans from their homes and “relocate” them to so-called “internment camps”. They couldn’t be trusted. And that’s why it was deemed necessary to drop not one but two nuclear bombs on the country of their origin.

Nearly four decades after I graduated from high school, these narratives and stories of “good and evil” remain. The names and faces are different, but the stories are the same. Anything associated with whiteness is pure, innocent, and virtuous. Anything associated with blackness or people of color is bad, dangerous, and violent. As a result, we are supposed to believe that it is acceptable for a grown man armed with a gun to stalk a school-aged kid returning from the store with iced tea and candy even though the man is advised by local authorities to “stand down.” After the man ignores the authorities’ advice, a brief altercation and physical struggle ensues. We are led to believe that the adult man had no choice but to shoot the kid, killing him. “He was only defending himself. You know how they are... they’re criminals, they steal. What was he doing there anyway... he doesn’t belong.”

We are supposed to believe that it is rational that an 11-year-old boy playing with a toy gun in a park could be shot and killed by police officers within five seconds of the officers’ arrival on the scene. We are supposed to accept that it is just a coincidence and an unfortunate set of circumstances that officers were not informed by a dispatch officer that the gun in this case was in the words of the person who called authorities “...likely a toy.” “Honest mistakes happen all the time. These guys were just doing their jobs.”

We are supposed to believe that a man whose “crime” was the equivalent of jaywalking, a misdemeanor, caused his own death because he resisted arrest. His underlying health issues in the end were identified as the real culprit. The fact that he repeatedly informed the officers during the ensuing physical altercation that he could not breathe was deemed “inconsequential.” If you think I’m talking about George Floyd, you’d be mistaken. I am talking about another gentleman in New York City who lost his life when 6 officers tackled him to the ground for selling illegal cigarettes. George Floyd lost his life for something equally trivial... a twenty dollar bill. Twenty dollar bills, cigarettes, iced tea, Skittles and toy guns... Don’t tell me that ALL lives matter!

*“To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.”* In addition to rage, I would add to Baldwin’s quote that to be a Negro in America is to be depressed, it is to despair, to be anxious, to be in a constant state of unease and to be hopeless. These are the stories of my childhood. These are the stories of my yesterday and today. These are the stories I fear of my tomorrow and worse than that of my son’s tomorrow.



In part two of my letter (coming to an email/website near you), I will share with you a few ideas about how we individually and collectively can continue to help Echo Horizon School be a beacon of hope and change for our community and our world.

All the best,

Roger Bridges  
Associate Head of School