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PARALLEL LIVES

Writers Bill Maxwell and Beverly Coyle recall growing up in Florida during the last days of Jim Crow
Two Writers’ Journeys
Lead to a Common Path

Bill Maxwell and Beverly Coyle were among the last generation of black and white Floridians to graduate from segregated schools, to sit in separate sections of the bus and to drink from different water fountains. Bill and Beverly came of age just as the curtain was about to fall on Jim Crow race laws and customs – a theme historian Canter Brown explores in more detail in his introductory essay.

The featured stories in this issue of FORUM are Bill’s and Beverly’s recollections of growing up in the segregated South of the late 1950s. We have titled the essays and a live program adapted from them “Parallel Lives.” This, in turn, is part of a broader multi-year initiative of the Council aimed at helping Floridians of diverse backgrounds in “Finding a Common Path.”

The two writers seemed perfectly equipped and uniquely compatible to take on the assignment. They are both in their early fifties, and both grew up in Northeast Florida. Also, they are the kind of writers who can explore a highly-charged subject with insight and candor.

Bill Maxwell is an editorial writer and columnist for the St. Petersburg Times whose syndicated work appears in newspapers nationally and sometimes internationally. Whether he is writing about the squalor of migrant farm worker camps or the serenity of Bok Tower Gardens, Bill has been expanding our sense of Florida and its people for years now.

Beverly Coyle has published three novels, all set in Florida. Her depictions of contemporary Florida life force us to look beyond the Florida dream to examine our rapidly changing landscape and demographics. Her stories are not merely set here, they dig knowingly into the state’s true character.

Bill grew up in Crescent City where he lived with his grandparents while his migrant parents followed the crops. The daughter of a Methodist minister, Beverly moved from parsonage to parsonage across the peninsula during her adolescence.

Their stories are evocative of a nearly forgotten era, and at times the material is painful and disturbing as the brutal dimensions of segregation, honestly recalled, were painful and disturbing. But there is also a unifying theme in the essays of two young adults trying to make intellectual, moral, and spiritual sense of the world: two teenagers, one black the other white, asking the universal questions, “Who am I?” and “Where do I fit in?”

The essays invite a thoughtful reader to fill in the blanks, and contemplate how much has changed in 40 years and what regrettable remains of racial separation and violence. As our initiative starts its second year, we have more programming in the works aimed at helping Floridians of diverse backgrounds understand each other’s traditions, hear each other’s stories and chart a common path into the future.

– Janine Farver
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More than a generation has passed since the civil rights revolution rocked the nation, and memories of that distant time have faded as new diversions and different cares have distracted attention. Many of today’s Floridians may not realize, for example, that their state served as a battleground for civil rights advances. The long and sometimes bloody conflict that eventually touched the lives of everyone who called the state home may prove difficult for them simply to imagine.
Scenes from a segregated society in the 1950s: Waiting rooms and drinking fountains designated "colored"; Klan activity in Tallahassee; a campaign flyer of gubernatorial candidate Sumter L. Lowry promising to "keep white schools white"; the Reverend C.K. Steele participating in the bus boycott...
During the civil rights era, itself, white and black Floridians struggled to comprehend the meaning of events and changes that were altering the courses and rhythms of their lives, a theme that Bill Maxwell and Beverly Coyle illuminate beautifully in the essays that follow. Even then, the changes came slowly and the old ways died hard. Circumstances prevalent in that by-gone time made it easy for many to resist the tide or attempt to ignore it. A different place and a different time, to be sure. But, it was one that cries out to us for understanding.

Begin by forgetting for a moment the glitzy and crowded playground that Florida offers today, and, instead, permit yourself to glimpse the alternate reality of an earlier time. How much earlier? Well, the state that we know emerged in great part after Walt Disney announced in 1965 that he was creating a bigger and better Disneyland in a swamp near Orlando. Only a few years earlier— that is, about 1959— the other Florida remained in place. Bill Maxwell, Beverly Coyle, and others were sensing then that a new Florida loomed on the horizon. They did not know the form that it would take, of course, but they had begun to feel the terrors.

That earlier Florida had been a poor place, rooted in agriculture, cattle grazing, and mining. A tiny elite of well-to-do whites usually bossed the state, retaining power by denying votes to blacks while preying upon the fears and prejudices of hard-up whites. The large majority dwelled either in small towns or the rural countryside. The Civil War had freed the state’s slaves. On the other hand, much of the white leadership determined to maintain a cheap labor source under trouble-free circumstances. In the 1880s they began to push the “Jim Crow” system, one that made racial discrimination a hallmark of everyday life. Then, legislators enacted law after law to mandate racial segregation, a practice sometimes called “drawing the color line.”

Eventually, blacks and whites lived lives that were divided, to a great extent, by a hard racial barrier. “White only” and “Colored only” signs labeled waiting rooms, water fountains, theater seating, public transportation, and other facilities. Racial contact outside the workplace— where African Americans typically were consigned to the most menial, difficult, and dangerous jobs— became rare. The greatest point of workplace contact came in white families’ houses, where black women labored at low wages to raise the children and maintain the homes. That situation persisted through the 1950s, well into the lives of millions who remain residents of Florida today.

The insult to African Americans growing out of the Jim Crow system involved limitations that ranged from the petty to the tragic. A black woman could spend her money shopping for clothing in one of the state’s department stores, but its management might refuse to let her try on the garments, much less use the “whites only” dressing room. The law barred African Americans, who paid taxes just like other residents, from swimming in most taxpayer-built pools. A child wading into the ocean at a public beach could bring on the police. Emergencies literally posed issues of life and death, since health facilities for African Americans usually were miles beyond white-only hospitals that denied humanitarian assistance to blacks.

The World War II years marked the beginning of the end for Jim Crow, just as they ushered in large population increases and a greater chance at affluence for most Floridians. Courts struck down some limitations on African-American political participation, and returning black veterans joined organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to demand justice. Tragically, racial violence, long a part of Florida’s social fabric, plagued the crusade. Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan stirred racial hatred. On Christmas night 1951, the haters murdered NAACP leader Harry T. Moore and his wife as the couple prepared for bed in their home at Mims. The weapon chosen was dynamite.

Through the 1950s, federal court decisions advanced civil rights protections, although progress in practical terms came in tiny measures. The Moores’ deaths had struck terror within a good part of the state’s African-American community, while hate group activities had emboldened white politicians to resist with every means at their disposal. Legislators denounced civil rights advocates as “communists” or “communist dupes” and harassed NAACP officials for membership lists. A rash of bombings punctuated calls for closure of public schools if racial integration were the alternative.

In the face of this fierce opposition, African Americans scored important successes. Public schools might remain racially segregated, but in the summer of 1959 five black students achieved admission to the University of Florida’s graduate school. Especially in the larger towns and cities, the numbers of African-American voters climbed, with the promise of greater political power to come. Finally, with the 1957 Little Rock school desegregation crisis, the federal government inched closer to partnering in the cause of civil rights.

Still, the big advances remained in the future in 1959. Young people would shake the South beginning in February 1960 with “sit-ins,” aimed at desegregating lunch counters and all manner of other public accommodations. “Freedom rides” and “freedom marches” would focus national and international attention on the South’s racial problems in subsequent years. Eventually, the Congress would tip the scales with the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Take care to place these events in their proper timeframe and to avoid overstating the pace of change before 1960. Through 1959 the civil rights revolution had yet to force real change in the daily lives of most Floridians. Racially segregated public schools educated children. Voter registrars, especially in rural counties, refused registration on account of color. Law enforcement agencies remained mostly white and mostly pro-white in perspective. And, a black man would not break the color line in the Florida legislature for another decade.

So, it becomes clearer how, in Florida’s small towns and rural areas, life could persist in 1959 much as it had for decades. Against the backdrop of distant thunder, “colored only” and “white only” still denoted a color line that stubbornly resisted eradication. Even if the ground trembled a bit from this court decision or that civil rights initiative, the local response would evidence itself only in the slightest of ripples. The color line stood. For the most part, the races remained separate. Their parallel lives, as yet, felt only hints of the changes that soon were to come.

Canter Brown, Jr. is a historian based in Tampa. He has written extensively on Polk and Hillsborough Counties and on other Florida topics.
Jim Crow: The term, like Jim Crow the practice, settled in over a long period of time. By the 1950s, Jim Crow was the colloquialism whites and blacks routinely used for the complex of laws and customs separating the races in the South. Hardly anyone felt a particular need to define it or explore its origins.

The term appears to date back at least to the Eighteenth Century, though there is no evidence that it refers to an individual. Rather it was mildly derogatory slang for a black everyman. Crow, as in black like a crow. A popular American minstrel song of the 1820s made sport of a stereotypic Jim Crow. "Jump Jim Crow" was a sort of jig. By the mid-1800s, a segregated rail car might be called the "Jim Crow." As segregation laws were put into place, first in Tennessee, then throughout the South, after Reconstruction, such diverse things as separate public facilities and laws restricting voting rights became known collectively as Jim Crow.

A bit like "political correctness" in recent years, the term was particularly popular with opponents of the practice. It was a staple of NAACP conversations of the '30s and '40s. Ralph Bunche once said he would turn down appointment as ambassador to Liberia because he "wouldn't take a Jim Crow job." A skit at Morehouse College during Martin Luther King's student days portrays a dramatic "burial" of Jim Crow. And just after the period discussed in Canter Brown's essay and the two stories that follow, at the eventful Republican National Convention of 1964 in San Francisco, picketers outside the hall chanted, "Jim Crow (clap, clap) must go." Which it pretty much did with passage of the 1964 and 1965 civil rights acts, vanishing abruptly, as Communist regimes later did at the end of the 1980s, in ways hard to imagine five or six years before.

Many contemporary books on the civil rights era don't use the term at all or use it without definition. Young listeners to the live program version of Bill Maxwell's and Beverly Coyle's memoirs of their 1950s childhoods were consistently baffled by the Jim Crow references. In a few decades the term has become as archaic as it once was omnipresent.

The eloquent historian John Hope Franklin, however, does pause to take Jim Crow's measure in his sweeping history of black life in America, From Slavery To Freedom: "It was a dear price that the whites of the South paid for this color line. Since all other issues were subordinated to the issue of the Negro it became impossible to have free and open discussion of problems affecting all the people. There could be no two-party system, for the temptation to call upon blacks to decide between opposing factions would be too great. Interest in politics waned to a point where only professionals, who skillfully deflected the interest from issues, to race, were concerned with public life...The new century opened tragically with 214 lynchings in the first two years. Clashes between the races occurred almost daily, and the atmosphere of tension in which people of both races lived was conducive to little more than a struggle for mere survival..."

— Rick Edmonds, from material in American Heritage Dictionary, Safire's Political Dictionary and From Slavery To Freedom.
For a Negro teenager, stepping out of his 'place' could be lethal. Separation, small indignities and occasional brutal encounters gave him a growing hatred for white people, which would cool – but only much later.
"THE DEPUTY SHOVED MY BACK AGAINST THE WALL, AND PRESSED HIS FOREARM AGAINST MY CHEST."
he early morning sun already was blazing hot as we cleared the bridge over the St. Johns River and the familiar stench of Palatka’s pulpwood mills flowed through the open windows of our car as my grandfather and I neared the Putnam County Courthouse.

I was excited because I would start the paperwork for getting a restricted drivers license. I had stayed up all night, dreaming of driving my grandparents’ 1949 Chevrolet, of showing off in front of the girls at all-Negro Middleton High School in Crescent City, of wearing exotic cologne and holding my wrist dangerously loose over the steering wheel as I had seen my father and other men do around women. And, of course, I dreamed of owning a fast, sporty coupe.

The year was 1959, and I was a few months away from being old enough to drive legally.

My grandfather, Robert Albert Bentley, and I climbed the courthouse stairs, moving aside at the door to let three white women pass. My grandfather bowed and tipped his hat. At the counter, a clerk, an older white woman with eyes that instinctively looked through Negroes, gave me a form to fill out. My grandfather sat in the chair beneath the ceiling fan, his hat resting awkwardly on his lap. An armed sheriff’s deputy, a tall white man with a ruddy face and hairy arms, stood beside me. Leaning on the counter, he chatted with the woman, studied me from head to toe and glanced over at my grandfather.

The room was hot, and I was nervous.

When the woman asked if I had a pen, I said, “No, I don’t.”

I had no idea that those three simple words had violated two centuries of strict tradition and had exposed me to the absurd, unspoken oath that required white men to protect the honor of white women—especially when their honor had been trampled on by a Negro.

As I reached for the pen that she was handing me, the deputy grabbed my left shoulder, spun me around to face him, shoved my back against the wall and pressed his forearm against my chest.

“You say ‘yes, ma’am,’ and ‘no, ma’am’ to a white lady, you little nigger,” he said in a low, deliberate tone, his breath smelling of tobacco.
Never will I forget the way he said "nigger" and the rage in his eyes. Over the years, I have relived this incident, assessing my reaction to it at the time and measuring its long-term effect on who I have become. Doubtless, it was a watershed in the life of a proud, happy 14-year-old who saw himself quickly growing into manhood.

Now, I look back and marvel that - given the racial customs of that time, when white men could do almost anything they pleased to Negroes - I escaped physically unharmed.

Weighing about 190 pounds and standing nearly 6 feet, I stiff-armed the deputy in the face, as I routinely did opposing players who tried to tackle me when I ran the football. I caught him off balance, and he went back, stumbling to hold himself up.

"Keep your hands off me!" I shouted.

Unaccountably, I was unafraid, only insulted and angry. He grabbed the edge of the counter and balanced himself. I looked into his eyes, sensing that he wanted to shoot me. I could feel the heat of bigotry in his eyes and the heavy burden of his being of the "superior race" guiding his actions.

As I stared at him, he looked away, turned to my grandfather and said, "Git this little trouble-making nigger out of here."

"Don't call me a nigger!" I shouted, moving toward him.

By now, my grandfather, a gentle man infused with the serenity of the deeply devout, was trembling. Jumping to his feet, he pulled me down the hall and out of the building. Terror was in his eyes as we passed the Confederate Heroes monument on the front lawn. In the car, he did not look at me nor did he speak. We drove the 26 miles back to Crescent City in silence.

When he died in 1995, we still had not discussed that day. I can only guess at his reason for never talking about it. But I knew even then what it had done to me: It made me feel mortal. Before then, I had felt invincible, believing that I would live forever.

On that day, though, there I stood, in that muggy courthouse, facing a man who wanted to annihilate me - who could have annihilated me with the squeeze of a finger - because my skin was black and because I momentarily had lost sight of the lay of the land and had stepped out of my "place."

Why? Because I had not said "ma'am" to a white woman. Even at that young age, I understood that my
fate was in the hands of a stranger, a white adult who despised me, a mere child, for no logical reason. I clearly understood that being a Negro in Northeast Florida was a high-stakes game of minimizing physical assaults.

Even more, I walked away from that courthouse with a diminished sense of self – a condition that I would spend subsequent years trying to repair.

Indeed, the courthouse encounter was a turning point for me. It also was a turning point in my growth, the point of support from which I now can appreciate the wholeness of my life. In other words, all events that occurred before that day in Palatka prepared me for surviving it.

I was born in Fort Lauderdale on Oct. 16, 1945, in all-Negro Provident Hospital. Negroes were not permitted in the white hospitals. My parents were farm workers who labored long and hard but could not regularly make ends meet. When I was 18 months old, heavy rains devastated Broward County’s pole bean crop, forcing my parents to “go up the road” to find work. En route to Exmore, Virginia, where they would work in potatoes, they deposited me in Crescent City with my father’s mother and stepfather, Lillie Mae and Robert Bentley, where I lived most of my childhood until I went away to college in 1963.

Crescent City, between Palatka and DeLand on U. S. Highway 17, is on the eastern rim of the Ocala National Forest, less than 40 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean. It is home to Lake Stella, tiny Lake Argenta and Crescent Lake, fed by the St. Johns River, where bass, bream, crappie, bluegill, and several other varieties of freshwater sunfish are abundant.

Crescent City was not an Arcadia. It was, however – and I am speaking only of the Negro communities because I rarely had close contact with local whites – nature’s gift to Negro children, mostly boys, who roamed the woodlands and fields “bare-footed” without a care, where Negro girls in gingham dresses skipped rope under live oak, magnolia and camphor trees.

And back then, for most Negroes who wanted to work, citrus, fern and pulpwood provided jobs at least seasonally. Those incapable of holding steady jobs could eke out a living pulling deer tongue, Spanish moss and catching gopher tortoises, or “Hoover chickens,” as many people called the delicious reptile.

My grandparents’ house was a green-shingled, three-bedroom, shotgun-style structure with a matching two-hole outhouse across the dirt road. On three acres of sandy soil near Lake Argenta, we used a lot of fertilizer to grow all of our vegetables and fruits. Our chickens laid enough eggs for five families.

Religion – the fear of a living god who, at will, intervenes in earthly matters – anchored the lives of the adults. My grandfather was a presiding elder in the House of God, Church of the Living God, the Pillar Ground of Truth Without Controversy, a black Pentecostal, or Holiness, denomination. He pastored a church in Crescent City and one in Palatka and routinely conducted or participated in tent revivals throughout the north central part of the state and the Panhandle. I accompanied him on these trips when my grandmother had to work or was “too plumb tired” to travel, as she would say.

One of the most memorable events of my early childhood involving white people occurred when I was 10 years old and went with my grandfather to a three-day revival in Lake City. “Pilgrims” came from several nearby counties. On the second afternoon of the gathering, a group of boys and I walked to a store in a Negro neighborhood. I bought a frosty bottle of Nehi grape soda, a bag of salted peanuts and a giant dill pickle. Returning to the tent, we rough-housed, “played the dozens” and fantasized about pretty girls as we approached the railroad tracks.

Out of nowhere, a green Ford pickup roared toward us. We could hear the horn blasting and the rebel yells. Three white teenage boys sat in the cab, and five or six others rode in the bed. We knew what was coming because, although we lived in different regions of the state, we had seen this game before – a potentially deadly gambit that was intended to elicit anger and instill fear in us.

We were about to be “nigger-knocked.”

As the adults in our lives had taught us, we ran in different directions to confuse our attackers. I had been nigger-knocked a year earlier on my newspaper route in Crescent City. I was pedaling my bicycle along Union Avenue and was preparing to toss a copy of the Palatka Daily News into a yard when a Woodie carrying three white boys approached. The passenger in the backseat hit me in the face with a balloon filled with urine.

On that day in Lake City, I knew immediately that I was doomed the second that I looked back. A boy in the truck bed held a leather belt in the air, the silver buckle twirling above his head. Suddenly, I saw the metal square descend, and, just as suddenly, every thing went black. Pain ripped through my face. Cupping my nose, I smelled my own blood and felt it pouring into my palms, then between my fingers. I thought that I would pass out and that I had lost both eyes.

My nose had been broken, and the gash was so deep that it exposed bone. My friends helped me back
TOO PROUD TO CRY, I STOOD IN THE MAIN AISLE HOLDING THE BRIDGE OF MY NOSE. THE FRONT OF MY STARCHED WHITE SHIRT WAS COVERED WITH MY BLOOD.

to the tent, where the standing-room-only crowd was shouting (a spiritual dance) to the syncopated sounds of hand-clapping, drums, a piano, guitars and dozens of tambourines. My grandfather, who was on the platform with the other preachers, ran toward me. Too proud to cry, I stood in the main aisle holding the bridge of my nose. The front of my starched white shirt was covered with my blood. The wife of the local minister, with whom we were staying, took me to her house, flushed my wound with antiseptic, bandaged it and gave me one of her husband’s shirts. My grandfather drove me to a Negro doctor in Gainesville he had known for many years.

Aside from the physical harm that it caused, the social significance of nigger-knocking was its power to perpetuate the myth of the white man’s dominance over us and, of course, to keep us believing in our perceived inferiority.

The Lake City incident deepened my awareness of Negro alienation. White people were a mystery to me and my peers.

They were strangers.

We would see them downtown or glimpse them driving their cars and trucks. Some of us took orders from them at work. But we rarely saw their faces up close or gave them sustained eye contact. Although his behavior appalled me, I understood why my grandfather took off his hat, lowered his eyes and rocked back and forth when talking to white people in public places.

Race always drove a wedge between “us” and “them.” But Crescent City, dubbed “The Bass Capital of the World” on the signs welcoming travelers, was not an openly brutal place. In many ways, it was better than most other towns I visited as a farm worker on the nation’s East Coast and throughout the Southeast. Many Negroes and whites accepted the separation of the races as an act of the Almighty. Adult Negroes instinctively bowed and scraped. Whites instinctively felt superior and benevolently endured our presence. Their neglect of us — official and otherwise — was habit.

Many stores, such as Sackett’s Grocery, extended credit to Negroes. Hilda’s Style Shop even let us try on clothing. As far as we knew, no store in Palatka or Daytona Beach would let us do so. And the People’s Bank of Crescent City never turned down qualified Negro borrowers, as far as any of us knew. The town’s two doctors and one dentist, all white, had integrated waiting rooms, while many of their peers in neighboring towns had segregated waiting rooms.

Many older Negroes and older whites developed
the kind of intimacy peculiar to the generations that had coexisted as master and servant.

Still, the vast differences between our two worlds were manifested almost everywhere, especially at Lake Stella, where most children, black and white, spent their summers. We assumed that Mother Nature had drawn a line across the 308-acre lake, separating the white side from the Negro side. We swam and played on the “Babylon side” – named for the community that was home to the Negro grave yard – and whites used the “Whitesville side.” It had white sand, which the town provided, on its shore. Our side was grassy and muddy and dotted with the shells of mussels that washed ashore.

Many whites had beautiful motor boats, and we envied the white children as they skimmed across the shimmering water on colorful skis. Precious few Negroes could afford a motor boat, and none of us had skis.

We enjoyed ourselves on the lake, however, by creating games. The greatest challenge, which most of us met with ease, was swimming from our side of Stella to Billy Goat Island, owned by the Reynolds family and was said to be the home of a giant, one-eyed alligator.

We had the most fun, though, playing a game called “gator.” We would draw lots. Whoever drew the shortest marsh reed became the gator. The game’s object was to outswim the gator. After the designated gator caught someone, a great struggle would ensue as it tried to pull the captive under water and hold him there. After freeing himself – or being released – the captive would become the new gator. Needless to say, we often came close to drowning the weakest swimmers. But we had fun.

Even so, we felt the racial alienation. We could not, for example, eat at Thomas Drugstore’s lunch counter or at Hap’s diner, which doubled as the Greyhound Bus station. When a group of us tried to integrate the drugstore counter one afternoon, a male clerk threatened us with jail and “ass whippings” and telephoned our principal, Harry Burney, who dutifully informed our families.

At the town’s movie theater, whites sat downstairs, and Negroes sat in the tiny, hot balcony. After the theater closed and became a bowling alley, Negroes were not permitted inside except to clean up.

Nothing, however, made us feel more estranged than school busing. Until the late 1950s, Negro high school students woke between 5:00 and 5:30 each morning and walked more than a mile to catch the bus that took us to Central Academy High in Palatka.

The direct route, by way of U. S. Highway 17, from Crescent City to Central Academy was about 30 miles. But we could not take the direct route. Too many kids lived in the woods. The driver picked up the first students in the southern region called Long Station.

Then she drove north to the other local black neighborhoods – Denver, Rossville, Babylon (where I lived) and Union Avenue. Leaving Crescent City, the bus, with 30 or more students, went southwest to Georgetown and Fruitland, then northwest to Welaka. From there, it traveled northeast to Pomona Park and then due north on Highway 17 to Satsuma, San Mateo and East Palatka. The bus would arrive at Central Academy between 8:15 and 8:30, barring mechanical trouble or a boat stopping us on the Dunns Creek drawbridge.

During the shortest days of winter, we left home in darkness and returned in darkness. But we did so happily because we thoroughly enjoyed school. Many of our lasting romances began on the bus, and some who met on the bus are still married nearly 40 years later. In time, we realized that, although school was fun and our bus rides were adventures, we were victims of Jim Crow’s evil, intentional cruelty.
During the summer of 1955, five other boys and I made a canoe from an oak that my Uncle Charlie helped us fell. From June to August, we crafted the vessel, using hatchets, saws, chisels, files, augers, rubbing stones, and fire. We named the finished product “Terro” because it was so ugly. We lugged it more than a mile to Lake Stella for its maiden voyage. First, we launched it without a passenger to test its balance. Then, because I was the smallest boy, I paddled it around the dock and back to shore. That done, Terro became part of our lives until it disappeared without a trace several years later.

* * *

During one of our football games, the year before I became a player, I saw two white boys standing near the concession stand. I asked them why they had a right to attend our games when we could not attend theirs. One of them looked at me and said, “Because we’re white and y’all are niggers.” I called them white crackers and a few vulgarities. My principal, Mr. Harry Burney, came over, pulled me aside and telephoned my grandparents. They came and drove me home. They scolded me and told me that I had better stop “being bold” toward white people. Such accommodating talk deepened my resentment toward whites who believed that they could do whatever they pleased to Negroes without fear of punishment.

A few days later, Mr. Burney ordered me to write a letter of apology to the boys and their parents. I did so but kept my fingers crossed.

As our innocence died and as we absorbed the reality of living as Negro children in the segregated South, play helped us escape some of the ugliness of southern Putnam County’s racism.

Because we were poor and could not easily buy manufactured toys and games, we had to invent and build. A group of us performed our greatest construction feat, when, after watching early episodes of Gunsmoke, we built our version of Dodge City. For several days, we collected scrap lumber, sheets of tin and several pounds of nails; we chopped blackjack oaks and collected palmetto fronds. After a month of sawing, hammering and digging, we had built six mean structures, each with its own crudely painted sign: “Long Branch Saloon,” “Doc’s Office,” “Marshal Dillon’s Office and Jail,” “Dodge House Hotel,” “Livery Stable” and “Church.”

During the day, we played Gunsmoke and waded in brown brooks teeming with crawdads and tadpoles. At night, we built campfires and roasted hotdogs. Our folks let us sleep in our Western town as often as we wished. During summer, only severe weather and church kept us away.

We never comprehended the incredible irony of our Dodge City experience: We were society’s black outcasts playing white characters and re-enacting white situations—although Negroes never appeared in the television show and although we had no sense of the universality of art and human themes. We played in our make-believe town for about three years.

One weekend, and I do not remember why, we abandoned Dodge City and never returned there to play again. In time, it disappeared behind vegetation, later falling under the fern industry’s bush hogs and plows.

As the decade of the ’50s neared its end, we played fewer unstructured games. Varsity football and basketball, pool, cards, talking trash, playing pinball at Chuck’s Barbershop, dittybopping, flirting and dating became our new games. We were “smelling our musk,” as the men would say of teenage boys beginning to see themselves as men.

At the same time, television having entered our lives, we had begun to hear of people such as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. Times were rapidly changing. Negroes everywhere were beginning to speak out. We children, too, were more emboldened and impatient. The civil rights movement was in full force, and we were being swept along in the tide.

I began to resent the gross unfairness of the so-called “separate but equal” school system that legally forced Negroes and whites to attend schools on oppo-
site sides of town, causing us to lead parallel lives that rarely intersected. The two schools shared, for example, the town-owned football field, a situation that called for creative scheduling to prevent the mixing of the races during home games. Negroes were not permitted inside the fence during white games. If we wanted to watch the white team, we had to stand outside—away from the fence. Whites, however, had the right to sit in the bleachers during our games.

My grandparents became seriously concerned about my growing resentment of whites after I told our insurance agent to stop eating out of my grandmother’s pots and pans on the stove. A friendly and talkative man, he collected our money on the same night each month. Invariably, he came while we were eating supper, knocked on the front door, and let himself in. He addressed my grandparents as Lillie Mae and Robert—even though they were his elders.

Placing his briefcase on the floor, the agent would march into the kitchen and eat whatever he wanted. My grandparents would not look at me while he banged lids and smacked his lips. All the while, he would call out things such as, “Best collards in town, Lillie Mae!” After eating, he never thanked my folks. He collected his money, belched, and drove away until the next time.

One night, I told the agent that he had no right to eat our food uninvited. No Negro could do so in his house. He turned red in the face and motioned to my grandmother to follow him outside. She returned after a few minutes—her eyes reflecting the pain of a lifetime of having bowed and scraped to survive.

“Don’t never say nothing else to that white man,” she said. Her expression was stern and she held her chin high. She had salvaged dignity from her faith in her god and had begun to hum the Negro spiritual “I’ll Fly Away,” as she always did at such times.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, feeling sorry for her.

Fortunately for me, the insurance agent was not the last white adult to enter my life in Crescent City. My grandmother was a maid, and one of her sites was the Crescent City Women’s Club. In addition to being a meeting place and a dining room, the facility served as the public library, housing at least 2,000 books. After my grandmother took me to help clean the building one Saturday morning when I was about 15, I saw the books for the first time. Although recognizing only a handful of titles and authors, I fell in love with the smell of old leather and parchment. After that morning, I came with my grandmother often, spending more time reading than cleaning.

At first, she would scold me for not working. Later, she encouraged me to read. Mrs. Anna Hubbard, the white lady who was often there, noticed my interest in books and began to suggest ones for me to read—Of
Mice and Men, The Sun Also Rises, Lord Jim, The Last of the Mohicans, Dracula and many more. Sometimes, she would ask me about my reading. One morning, she sat down with me, and we discussed Native Son. I recall being particularly embarrassed because Richard Wright’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas, murders a white woman. Sensing my discomfort, Mrs. Hubbard switched the subject to plot, character, point of view and other literary elements of fiction.

She also introduced me to writings about A. Philip Randolph, who was born in Crescent City in 1889. He was editor of the radical black journal The Messenger until 1925, when he founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. I read everything I could find on Randolph and wrote an essay for my civics class on the 1941 march on Washington that he organized. That march prompted President Roosevelt to issue a fair employment practices executive order that aided sleeping car porters. I used to walk to the house—a hulking two-story structure beside the highway in the woods—where Randolph was born and marvel that such a great man had actually lived there.

Although Mrs. Hubbard and I did not become close friends, we knew that we were intellectual soulmates. And I knew back then that she, along with my English teacher, Gloria Bonaparte, had sparked my interest in classic literature. Her kindness cooled my growing hatred of white people, and she convinced me that I was a good reader, that my love of the written word would guide my life. She was the first adult, white or Negro, to suggest that I was smart enough to attend college. I believed her and began to shape my future.

One afternoon, I told Mrs. Hubbard that I wished that she were one of my teachers. I will never forget her reply.

“That’s nice of you,” she said, “but white people can’t teach in your school.”

POSTLUDE

CRESCENT CITY – Today, this town of nearly 2,000 residents still is not an Arcadia—for anyone. But it is a far better place than it was when I lived here as a child. Although the freezes of the 1980s killed the area’s thousands of acres of citrus trees, the fern industry has taken up most of the slack. The year after I graduated from all-black Middleton Junior-Senior High, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting discrimination in voting, employment, public facilities and, of course, education. Unlike whites in many other small towns statewide, the overwhelming majority of whites here accepted the new legislation and built a new integrated junior-senior high school, turned the old white campus into an integrated middle school and the black campus into an integrated elementary school.

Old Middleton is now Middleton-Burney Elementary, renamed to honor a black man, Harry Burney, Jr., my principal, who died recently. And the high school has a black principal, Joe Warren.

The town elected its first African-American city councilman, my social studies teacher, several years ago, and blacks now serve on civic boards and are served in all public establishments. Now, instead of merely cleaning the Women’s Club, blacks can use the facility for social events. At the adjacent library, all groups explore the world of books under the same roof. And when I come to town these days, I can sleep in either of the two motels that Negroes were barred from in the 1950s.

Perhaps my most remarkable post-1950s experience involving Crescent City occurred in 1993, when I taught English and journalism at Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville. Calling the roll on the first day of an English class, I realized that two students, both white, had the same last name: Suggs. The boy was in a wheelchair, and the girl sat next to him. After class, I told them about my childhood doctor in Crescent City whose name was Suggs. They said that they were brother and sister and that their father, Dr. Suggs, practiced in Crescent City, their hometown.

I could not believe that I, a black man, was teaching the son and daughter of my white doctor of so many years ago, when Negroes and whites were not permitted on the same campus. The Suggs children and I had a wonderful semester, spending many hours together, talking and slaying ghosts from the past.

Although some of the vestiges of the Old South linger, I am happy to see how much the town has changed, how the races are living together amicably: Confederate flags that once flew in selected places were removed many years ago. The high school sports teams are no longer the “Rebels.” They are now the “Raiders.” Gone, too, are the police-ordered “White Only” and “Colored” signs that navigated much of our physical existence downtown. Blacks and whites even swim on the same side of Lake Stella.

My biggest regret is that my grandparents and other Negroes of their generation, especially the hard-working church-goers, died before experiencing the new Crescent City. Their silent, dignified suffering, after all, made today’s relatively tolerant town possible. One day, perhaps, the graveyards will be integrated.
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The young girl caught glimpses of a wider world where the place of black people would soon be changing. Still, with the entrenched racial separation of the times, something may have been lost for good.
"I WOULD EYE THE BLACK FACES LOOKING DOWN FROM THE THEATER BALCONY."
In my 1950s childhood, most activities revolved around church and school. Everything seemed locked within this arena. Of course it was not a natural one – not some undisturbed lily pond found in nature.

It was artificial – a slowly constructed pond built of laws and social custom, frequently reinforced by acts of violent repression. The result was the Jim Crow system. I grew up seeing “Whites Only” and “Coloreds Only” water fountains. I had no understanding of the hardship this system presented to black people just in terms of daily insult – never mind those of education and work and housing and money and travel. I was illiterate when it came to these signs that...
underscored a law by which a whole race could be virtually removed from view. Even for my parents, the vigilante and Klan activity right after the Civil War could be said to be "before their time." We all looked at those signs without reading them. Black presence in our lives was so minimal that incidents of racial conflict did not exist in my young perspective.

My father was a Methodist clergyman and my mother a former teacher and homemaker. Their respect for differences in race and creed grew out of education and a strong belief in one God who unites us all. The folks I associated with involved themselves in the weekend devotions of church services and Sunday school. And we were proud to be Methodists. I saw us in our best dress.

I remember my parents going to a lot of meetings and visiting individuals and families during the week.

Our weekends often began over at the church in our various efforts to be ready for a long Sunday of services, children, choirs, Bible study and the occasional picnic spread, which we called "dinner on the grounds."

One day when I was about nine or ten, we were visiting my mother's people in Oviedo, and I got a rude glimpse of how we Methodists were perceived by some. My own grandfather, a man long convinced that church was all right for women and children, claimed that he had been reading about Methodist involvement in something called the civil rights movement. He began explaining how shocked he was to learn that the Methodists were among those Americans recently infiltrated by the Communist Party.

Mom ran from the supper table in tears; Dad, the son-in-law, sat there fuming at his plate. "What's behind this integration business?" my grandfather said. "Red Communism, that's what!"

I was born Aug. 2, 1946, nine months to the day of my father's return from the Navy and World War II. My first memories begin in Boynton Beach where Dad had one of his early churches after the war, and where my eight-room schoolhouse is now a museum. We moved every four years within the Florida Methodist Conference: Boynton, Jacksonville, Fernandina Beach, Venice-Nokomis, and our home base in Oviedo. These are my hometowns.

Historically, I hail from Lake City where a great-great grandparent was born. Dad was North Alabama-South Tennessee stock. His people were tenant farmers whom he essentially left behind after managing to slip away – first to college, then to Methodism, then to my mother, who is a graduate of Florida Southern College.

I think my father was truly liberalized at Emory University in Georgia and had a scholarly rather than literal reading of the Bible. I also think his father-in-law's antagonism and sniffing out the so-called foreign, evil influence lurking behind reform did a lot to sharpen my father's changing sense of who he was and how he was to behave in a changing world.

My father's "job," if you will, put tremendous burden on me as a child in terms of Christian service. I was very religious, and in my adult life I frequently recall how central to my sense of reality was the singing of such songs as: "Jesus loves the little children / All the children of the world / Red and yellow, black and white / They are precious in his sight / Jesus loves the little children of the world."

And later the text: "...if a man hath two coats, he must give one away." I grew up in fear of our excess. I had no coats, but I had many sweaters and I knew it was wrong. I knew, even in our modest lifestyle, that we had way too much.
S

ometime in the mid-'50s, all over the country, the idea of the shopping center was born. One day my whole family found itself in the large parking lot of our new Jacksonville shopping center’s “Grand Opening” show. A black family pulled alongside us. All the adults stood around waiting while most of the kids climbed up on the hoods. The show took forever to begin, but when it did, big spotlights snapped on from all directions and we watched while a young white girl climbed to the top of thirty-foot ladder. Suddenly there was a drum roll to help build the excitement. An assistant already perched on top of the ladder helped the young girl set fire to her gasoline-soaked life jacket. We held our breaths as she turned to face us, placing her hands gracefully above her head, and then diving straight down into nothing more than a small tank filled with water.

We cheered and hooted at the feat, and then we all left our cars and went into the new stores, set up like a new town, and we bought things. Together. Corporate America had hit upon a colorblind arena: Money.

Shopping centers gave blacks and whites space to hang out together, after a fashion. And I think it was here that I saw my first images of blacks in families, in units like my own. We all still maintained our traditional, segregated shopping areas close to where we lived. Shopping centers were neutral ground. They sprang up out of a field that was on no particular “side of town.”

If one really wanted to maintain Jim Crow, shopping centers were a big mistake. There was irony in those signs over soda fountain counters: “We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.” This was language meant to renew the code of “coloreds” and “whites only.” But the restaurant and counter owners had devised this slightly legal-sounding “reserve the right” and thereby marked the desperation behind it. I think the new language sounded one of the first death knells to Jim Crow for white people. If two different families could walk around eating ice cream cones together in this relatively new common space, then why could one such family sit down at a counter and the other not? Shopping centers were spaces that caused me to see what I had previously been unable to see, having been born into what looked like peaceful, agreed-upon separation of blacks and whites.

I loved the shopping center. I could go there with a few dollars and buy a ton of trinkets. About every four years we packed up barrels of dishes, pots and pans, clothes, bedding, photographs and books, my mother’s Fostoria and silver. My trinkets would always get pitched. We were supposed to be free of extraneous stuff with each move to a new parsonage. They were
Fernandina Beach, shown in the early 60s (above), is a historic Northwest Florida town, one of several where young Beverly's family lived. Beverly at 5 (right) and as a 15-year-old (below).

furnished. In Fernandina Beach, the parsonage had a pink vanity table in the room that became mine in the summer of 1959. I was 13.

The vanity table had a set of drawers on either side of a sunken center where I kept a few toiletries. Even then, I must have been aware of the table's symbolic meaning beyond being just a piece of furniture: as a girl, I was supposed to do the very best with what God had given me. Only maidens in fairy tales and novels were reported to be naturally beautiful without any help.

I was to think positively, look bravely into that mirror and work at it.

It was on this vanity table that I forged my mother's name to a note. I needed her written permission to check out Gone with the Wind from the Junior High library. One might think that back then, in Jim Crow days, a white school would require parental sign-off on a book containing racial conflict of any kind. Rumor among us kids was that the book was good and sexy. I wasn't sure if it would be okay by my mother in 1959 that I be allowed to learn, on my own, all that Scarlett O'Hara had done with what God had given her. By making it a little illegal for me to get hold of that stuff, the collective community found a way, unknown to itself, to assure that I did get hold of it. I forged that note without batting an eye.

At the time I was forging notes on my vanity table, I was resisting long looks into the mirror. The mirror was not giving me back what I wanted to see, even when I worked hard. However, I was doing quite a bit of staring into the beautiful eyes of Johnny Mathis. I had all three of his albums to date. I'd found those albums at the shopping center, of course. I would sit and look at his face — three versions of it — each more handsome and stunning than the other. Try as separatists' cultures will, they can only do so much to arrange a view of the world. Reality will burst right through all the wrapping that is put around white people, especially white girls. Here was a black man on the front of the album looking right at me, permitted to eye me kindly. I had no idea that black men couldn't do that and live. Or maybe I did have some idea. I look back now and realize Elvis scared me and, in life, would have rejected me. Pat Boone would have patted me on the head. Johnny Mathis clearly loved me. Red and yellow, black and white, I was precious in his sight. Johnny Mathis loved the children of the world.

Of course I saw black people: men off in the fields, men gathered alongside a sandy road waiting to go home. They worked for my farming grandparents in Oviedo where I so often visited at Thanksgiving and Christmas time. I saw the lone woman walking into white neighborhoods to cook and clean. The routines of our day seemed placid and orderly. With no one in my hearing involved in hatred or racial epithet, I took separation for granted. Had the violence of a former time and the violence still occurring beyond my knowledge been
explained and admitted to, I would have had a better way of interpreting my everyday images. Mostly I was left to my own devices.

For example, the dozen or so times a woman was hired to help clean the parsonage, I saw my mother turn herself into a tornado, knocking herself out with work, leaving the other woman paralyzed. I picked up a lot of “stuff” around that: two messages at least. The first was that we worked as hard as the other woman did because we truly did not set ourselves above that kind of work or the woman herself. And the second, although subtle, was still very clear to me: we might have tried to prove to a white maid that we could work as hard and as fast, but with the black woman, the effort was strained, even slightly desperate—our making sure there was no tinge of race or rank. And in the strain, there it was.

I would eye with curiosity the one lone janitor, keeping to himself, quietly eating his lunch in that airless room where the school stored the red disinfectant sawdust. I would eye the black faces looking down from the balcony of my neighborhood theater. Here’s what I believe I felt when I looked up at them: I saw the people I would one day be called upon to serve as a missionary or in some other facet of my Christian work. I developed a well-defended position: they were all patiently waiting for me to grow up and come to them.

Granted, I had fears of being a miserably lonely, old maid missionary—unsuitable in a lineup of available mates. But I believe I was also grasping loneliness in a social sense and that I was intuiting a bigger truth that haunts me to this day: the essential loneliness of segregation—the fact that if one can’t go to people right now—people who live right across town—then to go to them later is to arrive unsuitable indeed. I was being stunted by Jim Crow.

In the fall of 1959, the same fall I forged that note to the librarian, I came home one day and announced that there would be no school on Monday afternoon. The annual Lions Club minstrel show started Monday, and there was going to be a special matinee version for the junior high. School was going to let out at around noon, and buses would haul us all over to the recreation center after lunch. The cost of the show, one dime.

A big silence fell after I made the announcement. Dad got red in the face. Finally he said, “Well, you can’t go to that. You don’t have my permission to go to something like that.”

I wish I could remember the conversation that followed. My guess is there wasn’t much of one, because there almost never was when Daddy got mad. He was

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I am aware of, but by no means an authority on, black-face minstrel shows.

They have an English and American history that predates slavery and then runs concurrently with it. After emancipation, black troupes of performers (many of whom also used the traditional grease paint and white lips long stylized by whites) traveled the country and often triumphed over white minstrel troupes. Thus, minstrel shows became a legitimate art form for blacks, and, some would argue, for whites as well when considered through the lens of history.

In minstrel shows staged by amateur groups such as a local Lions Club, music and song was the bill of fare and not everyone wore black face.

Those who did, however, often adopted a between-the-acts vaudeville style of presenting short skits in which one-liners or jokes could be swapped between club members in front of a knowing audience. Each character might take on the name of a prominent white person in town. For example, the Methodist minister whose real name was Reverend Jones would be drunk “Brother Jones” in black face. The named local high school principal might become the womanizer so staged, the mayor an embezzler, and so forth. A local minstrel show, therefore, could do something a professional one could not: become a roasting of townspeople, in this case people pretending to be blacks pretending to be whites. Further plumbing of what all this means racially and sociologically requires book-length treatments on the subject, and very good ones exist.

A former classmate sent me a newspaper photograph of the local minstrel show I write about in my piece, and the photograph is similar to the archival one shown below.
furious. I was confused. Was this somehow my fault? My mother and I probably left him and went into the kitchen to pretend to be cleaning up.

That’s what we did when Daddy got mad. We skedaddled. I recall complaining to her: “If I don’t attend the minstrel show, I’ll have to go to study hall.” My mother was quick to grasp how this might embarrass me, the new girl in town, if I were the only one who didn’t go.

“They’ll have to keep back a teacher, just because of me!”

“You don’t know that,” my mother reasoned. “There might be all kinds of kids who won’t be allowed to go.”

I have no trouble remembering the anger in his voice. “You can’t go to something like that.” In hindsight, I realize that he didn’t know that minstrel shows were still being staged. Nor was it yet quite the year for him to find the words to say, “That’s racist.” Perhaps it was more as if one of his children had picked up dirty talk in the street and was now repeating it without knowing what was meant. To tell her was to get into something very complicated for a child who hadn’t been told much. More complicated still for a person who was not yet practiced in where to begin.

Come Monday I was the only one in study hall. For all my father’s shortcomings at that particular moment in 1959, I would give a lot if he were around now to know how important his strong reaction has been to me – with or without explanation.

My guess is that my presence in study hall was noted and its meaning understood – a boycott of one.

I can only be certain that there was a fatal hour alone with a discommoded teacher. I also recall how my mortification began to dissolve, and then, remarkably, how quickly it was replaced with enormous pride in myself. I took all credit for Dad’s burgeoning courage and action. This stealing from one’s parent is what children do, and in so doing forge for themselves a set of personal insights whose true origins necessarily take a lifetime to trace. Certain horrors of the day were quite out in the open, even when I started elementary school. No one was denying me permission to see newsreels at the movies – the ones very lately released some ten years after World War II ended. Here was amazing footage from the concentration camps – bodies by the hundreds spilling out of the backs of dump trucks.

And there was the Cold War. In Jacksonville, with its proximity to a naval base, I was asked to prepare in a bizarre fashion for the bomb. I had to bring to school a canvas bag of canned goods. All of us had to have one.

Our mothers stitched up the bags at home, put our names on them, and placed inside them a two-week supply of food. This contraption hung on the backs of our desks in plain view for the entire year. Once in while we would have a drill. Should the bomb be headed our way during school hours, we (taking advantage of the early warning system) would grab our sacks and cleverly head (as an entire school) across our sports field. Freight cars would be waiting for us on the real doomsday, at which point we’d climb into these cars, apparently, and, with luck, be shipped off to safety. To Georgia.

The civil disobedience going on and the white population’s violent response to it was national news, but I don’t recall knowing it at the time – the arrests, the demonstrations, and the great meaning of it, dramatically and ideologically. Banning me from going to a Lions Club minstrel show was my first real news of it all.

That would have been before the bombing of a Sunday school building and the deaths of four black children. By 1963 the press was not cooperating in keeping such things out of my view. I could see it on TV – the photographs of those little girls and their families. I knew I had seen them before! At the Shopping Center’s Grand Opening – all of them and all of us seated on the tops of our cars, our faces uplifted, our same looks of fear and pleasure as that young girl really did prepare to set herself on fire and jump into that tiny tank. We had all screamed together in delight and relief when she made that perfectly impossible dive.

Like all the wake-up calls of this century, it would take a bomb to put an end to minstrel shows for most
The 1950s constituted the beginnings of high school Royalty. Football players and their girlfriends were the crowned kings and queens of our schools, both black and white. And to those of us who were musical, the school band offered humble placement within the Court.

On a borrowed bassoon, I was groomed in junior high against the day that the senior bassoonist would graduate and leave town. Talk about keeping a kid off the street, socially. The bassoon—also known as the “burping bedpost”—was the most time-consuming and awkward and comically viewed of the woodwinds. Both of us were tall and skinny and without any interesting curves to be seen. We made quite a pair.

On the other hand, the instrument initiated me into the mysterious order of big double reeds. Such care and feeding! Also, the four, separate, rosewood, carved pieces of the bassoon’s body had to be assembled and disassembled with slow devotion. Perhaps because of the private bliss and discipline my bassoon brought me, I was protected from some of the slings and arrows of outrageous teenage fortune.

decent folk. Not a bomb from the enemy we were expecting, not the Soviets. But from ourselves—a bomb planted by our fellow white citizens in a Baptist Church in Birmingham.

The year the Civil Rights Act passed, I was a freshman at FSU in Tallahassee. One day in the fall of that year, we students found out that a certain all-white church in town was going to put it to a member vote: would they or wouldn’t they ever admit blacks into their worship service on Sunday mornings. My very first Sunday sermon at the Wesley Foundation Chapel on campus was about this kind of bigotry. “The most segregated hour is the church hour,” our minister intoned, preaching to a mixed audience—Methodist students having driven over from all-black FAMU, three miles from an all-white FSU. And when it got out that the vote went badly downtown and that the congregation had voted to bar black people from worshiping with them, we were outraged. Some of us decided to post a sign on their church door and call up the press to get a picture. The sign read: “We reserve the right to refuse Salvation to anyone!”

At college, I was admitted for life into a liberal community. This gives me cause for rejoicing at my good fortune. I suppose I am perceived as outspoken, prepared to take my stand against injustice. I am proud of In Troubled Waters, a novel I wrote in which black and white characters struggle to know each other across a divide that still exists. I’ve even got a few scars from having authored it.

B

lack people are now in my life as students, friends, colleagues, neighbors in my building in Manhattan; they are my lawyers, doctors, editors and the presidents of universities where I’m likely to teach; they are among the most prominent bishops of the United Methodist Church. But I am insulated to this day in ways that trouble me.

In my travels I meet people wanting loudly to affirm how far we’ve come. Yes, I want to say, we have come some distance. But we live in separate worlds formed long ago in more parts of this country than in the South. When, from the start, various systems remove from view certain people as a group, it is devastating to contemplate that removal in its fullest terms. How much of our collective imagination is affected; how much of our experimentation and expansiveness as creative people? I suppose I am talking about the soul of the citizen and am trying to present, to myself at least, some understanding that takes in more than merely how far we have come. In refusing to serve each other at critical points along the way, individuals and entire nations can end up unable to serve.
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Whites were to be carefully avoided, no more and no less

I didn’t have to be asked twice when invited to be involved with “Parallel Lives” as an editor and performance coordinator. After it was described to me, I immediately began the work, right there in my head, as I hung up the phone. When told that I would be working with Beverly Coyle and Bill Maxwell and their experiences of growing up in 1950s segregated Florida, I didn’t skip a beat. This was a scenario that I knew well. I, too, had grown up in the 1950s segregated south, and although that was in Georgia and not Florida, I had been a “naturalized” Floridian long enough to fill in the gaps. Already familiar with both writers’ work, I was eager to see how each would approach the subject. It promised to be an interesting job at the very least.

And I was right. Working with them was a powerful experience. Bill’s essay seemed to come right from the tip of his tongue, like it had been sitting there since the 1950s ready to leap out onto the page. (But obviously, that is not the case.) His stories filled my head with a vivid, though often terrifying cinema that was already in my psyche as I grew up experiencing life with my father, brother, uncles and friends. It was a male experience that shaped my early view of the world, one that was so intimately bound to my own sense of security and power that there was very little for us to discuss about the material. It was already in my cells: the knowledge of the ever-present physical danger as well as the sensual beauty of the warm, rich, life that the black Southern 1950s community often provided.

Like Zora Neale Hurston and other African Americans who were nurtured by this result of segregation, Bill told of violence and cruelty, but also of strength and peace. I gained a renewed awareness of the mechanism that shaped his voice. His stories recalled memory after memory for me, situations and lessons that gave me formulas for survival that have been my modus operandi for nearly half a century.

I was born in 1950 in Atlanta, Georgia, in a world so totally segregated that it is difficult for today’s young people to fathom. When I tell the stories to youth of any ethnic group, I must emphasize over and over, that white people were not a “missing” element; they were nonexistent as normal, walking, talking, neighbors, friends, teachers or colleagues. They existed on the television (if you had one), and occasionally in terrifying positions of power as in Lester Maddox, Bull Connor and George Wallace. You could see them marching in Ku Klux Klan parades, to be caught downtown when they made their eerie, silent, trek through the heart of Atlanta. I remember my father’s warm hand on my shoulder, holding me firmly as they walked by and my asking him why they didn’t have a band, and why they seemed so sad. I was used to the magic and rhythms of the historically black Atlanta University Center college homecoming parades. And my father, usually always ready for my questions and discussions, put me off saying that we would talk when we got home.

I attended Nathan R. Forrest Elementary School; a school, I understood, that was formerly white and had been switched to “Negro” when white flight had moved the communities further north. I used to look at the names of the former owners of our textbooks: Becky, Lance, Henry. These names, written in childish hand near the red Atlanta Board of Education “discarded” stamp, never failed to capture my imagination. In my naivete I often wondered why these books, which appeared to me to be perfectly wonderful books, had been discarded by these strange, absent children. When I asked my parents about it,

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having grown up in Minneapolis in the '50s and early '60s, I am tempted to claim I never saw, let alone knew, a black person until I was a teenager. On closer reflection, that’s not true. The waiters at the charmingly ramshackle seaside resort in Virginia Beach we frequented for vacations in my early elementary years were black. My mother thinks they were probably students at nearby Norfolk State.

Negroes and Chippewa Indians off the reservation were tiny twin minority populations in the Minneapolis of that time, probably less than one percent each. Ethnicity for Minnesotans, as fans of Garrison Keillor will know, was largely a thing of Saint Lucia’s Day and lutefisk with our enormous Scandinavian population, some quite recent immigrants. If there was an exotic and suspect “other” in our family, particularly among certain great uncles and aunts, it was probably Catholics. I remember with no particular pride our otherwise sensible minister preaching a 1960 sermon on “Should a Catholic Be President?” He concluded probably not (though events would prove John Kennedy was not an especially observant Catholic and his potential loyalties were not divided between his country and the Vatican).

As a nascent enthusiast for public affairs, I certainly became aware of the civil rights movement as it exploded in the early 1960s. I recall my mother in the unfamiliar role of guest Sunday School teacher, skillfully leading an awareness 101 session, based on a Newsweek cover story, on what it was like to be a Negro. But this was all a long, long way away from Minneapolis. The South might as well have been Kosovo. The spring of my senior year in high school included a closing month of non-course “enrichment.” We read, among other things, the ridiculous Black Like Me, in which a white writer applied a generous supply of Mantan then traveled the South to experience being treated like a Negro, an undertaking later parodied to fabulous effect in Walker Percy’s The Last Gentleman.

The summer I turned 16, I attended an American Baptist church camp at Green Lake, Wisconsin. A pretty forgettable experience except for two well-played softball games, sneaking out of afternoon classes to a first rate golf course on the grounds, and a girl named Virgie who taught a few of the guys (not me) some interesting things not on the church-camp curriculum. And I recall that one of the counselors was black—a quiet, serious, intelligent man. Maybe his name was Bill, or maybe Bill Maxwell puts me in mind of this dimly remembered figure. I felt (descendingly, in retrospect) a pleasure that the counselor was a nice fellow and that, during this passing encounter, we got along fine.

Finally, in my senior year at a private day school outside Minneapolis, I got something more like a real world experience of race. An elderly member of the immensely rich Dayton department store family had decided it was about damn time for our school to be integrated and had endowed two new scholarships to that purpose. Pat Herndon, a fine hockey player and average student, and Bob Hyde, an average athlete and excellent student who I believe went on to Johns Hopkins and became a doctor were the first two chosen. I’m curious, thinking about it now, how they were chosen and prepped. In any case, they handled themselves gracefully in the uncomfortable exercise of being a first-of-his-race, and so, by and large, did we. Any hostilities sailed past me.

One day, for reasons that elude me, I was reading Eugene O’Neill’s “The Emperor Jones” in the school library before lunch. (Those who rail against political correctness might wish to check out this

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Good things often have good antecedents, and that is the case with “Parallel Lives.”

Ten years ago, Clifton Taulbert, a lecturer, businessman, and writer, published a memoir of his childhood in the small Mississippi Delta town of Glen Allan. The title, Once Upon A Time When We Were Colored (later shortened), made clear his intentions — warm reminiscences with a little fairy tale gossamer and an ironic acceptance of a dated, and sometimes deplored term for his race.

Taulbert is not in some sort of denial about the times, but he can find pleasure in recalling even such episodes as the time a touring colored minstrel show came to town.

He is explicit on the point in his introduction: “Even though segregation was a painful reality for us, there were some very good things that happened. Today I enjoy the broader society in which I live and I would never want to return to forced segregation, but I also have a deeply felt sense that important values were conveyed to me in my colored childhood, values we are in danger of losing in our integrated world. As a child, I was not only protected, but nourished, encouraged, taught and loved by people who, with no land, little money and few other resources, displayed the strength of a love which knew no measure.... They are the reason I want today’s world to remember an era that in our haste we might forget – that era when we were called colored.”

Gene Dattel, a banker, consultant and lecturer, read Taulbert’s book and realized they had grown up during the same period 30 miles apart. He wrote to Taulbert. They corresponded, talked and ultimately developed a version of their childhood stories as a presentation to audiences. Dattel’s people, Jewish merchants who settled in Mississippi around the turn of the century, ran a little general store, and the two believe Taulbert’s people must have shopped there. They debuted the program, “Just Two Guys From Mississippi,” at New York University, then took it several other places including a synagogue in Tampa, where Humanities Council staff members saw it.

Bill Maxwell and Beverly Coyle bring a lot more to their version of Parallel Lives than a change of setting to Florida and a more elegant title. Maxwell (who recalls reading Taulbert’s book when it came out rather than recently) remembers the sunny side of his youth in the swimming, canoe and Dodge City escapades. In this piece and others, he shows that a poor, black family could also be a strong family with tough moral values and a respect for education. But Maxwell also adds straight-up personal accounts of experiencing brutal, ugly, incomprehensible acts of racism. He describes how that left him an angry young man, distanced from whites, and only later able gradually to achieve some reconciliation.

Coyle brings a novelist’s roaming sensibility and an evocation of girlishness, both significant enrichments of the dialogue. Both Coyle and Maxwell are talented, full-time professional writers making possible this magazine version of their successful live program. As a critic once wrote of the other William Maxwell – the old, white, Midwestern novelist and short-story writer – he works hard at getting it just right, so that our work as readers is easy.

There is one other salient difference between the original and subsequent versions. Taulbert and Dattel grew up in the muck of the deepest of the deep South, literally surrounded by cotton fields. Coyle and Maxwell’s youths were in a more generic 1950s-60s South of small towns, churches and shopping centers. In fact – with a little introspection – most of us first-wave baby boomers could probably conjure up a version of Parallel Lives, albeit not quite so richly realized as Bill’s and Beverly’s. Bill McBride, the managing partner of the Holland and Knight law firm, works with an African-American lawyer his age. The two have discovered they grew up a few miles apart in Leesburg, and both played high-school football – on separate white and black teams, of course. Nor does one have to be from the South to participate in this exercise. I’m inclined (accompanying story on Page 31) to look up my old Minnesota schoolmate, Bob Hyde, whom I haven’t seen or heard of or thought much about in more than 30 years.

– Rick Edmonds
they explained that these children had new books and that I must concentrate on the material in the books and not the externals of how they came into my hands. So I did. Today it is a huge joke to me that Robert Zemeckis' fictitious character Forrest Gump claimed to be related to and named for Nathan B. Forrest, one of the founders of the Klan.

The white presence was no more and no less than that; something to be carefully avoided, very much the way smart Floridians avoid the direct summer sun without screen, or alligator hang-outs during mating season. This is the way they were, and the best thing to do was steer clear of them. Because of this, segregation was a blessing. The physical separation was a great protection for us. And for this reason, plus my plain good fortune in this matter, I have no terrifying incidents of physical brutality to relate.

We did not go into white neighborhoods, and when whites were spotted in ours we were careful to stay as far away as possible. As in Bill's story we knew that a carload of white people was a serious reason for alarm. But even so, no matter how careful we were, no matter how protective my family was, there was still, then the "drive-by spitting" and the name calling which was always something from which to recover.

Bill's stories called me back to a sense of tenderness and fear that I felt for my male loved ones. In my young life, I was surrounded by male figures who loved me and offered me their absolute protection — and so my mother constantly reinforced in me a sense of duty that I must never do anything to cause my father, uncles, brother, etc. to have to protect me. This filled me with a sense of responsibility about my actions, my style of dress, my speech, every move I made. In this way a great deal of my behavior was shaped out of fear of endangering them and the desire to control circumstances over which I had no control. More painful to me than insult or harm to myself was when I was harassed in the presence of loved ones and their reaction to it. Witnessing their struggle to protect me and resist this terrorism against unbeatable odds sometimes left scars between us that never healed.
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My experience with Beverly’s stories was also familiar, but very different. She had another kind of work to do and she took it on with a warrior spirit and dug deep, questioning her memories, her ideas, her history. I had the opportunity of watching the writer at work, taking the characters and situations of her formative years and grinding them down into a fine powder until no fiction remained. And we also found a lot of the same memories. The socialization of the Southern female was my story too. It was a lucky coincidence that we were both the daughters of deeply committed ministers, growing up in parsonages, filled with concerns related to our parents’ work.

Her stories recalled the white female presence in my life as a child in the ‘50s. A presence that was even more shadowy than the male one. Though most of the dangerous incidents I had witnessed involved white men, the role in this scenario for white women came to my attention mid-way through the decade. A white woman had prevaricated about an encounter with 14-year-old African American, Emmett Till, that led to his lynching in Mississippi in 1955. The death of Emmett Till remained in my thoughts for many years. I will never forget the photograph in *Jet* magazine of his body, tortured and drowned. I would stare at this picture for hours, read and re-read the brief article about his brutal murder, shocked and traumatized over and over. My young mind could barely understand or believe what I was seeing and reading. Today, sadly, there are other gruesome situations to replace this early memory, and yet I will never forget my visual initiation into the absolute brutality that racism can bring. It was also my introduction to the horrible dynamic that gender plays in the schematic of racism and violence. In this way, white women took their place in the scenario.

Beverly’s stories also represented a positive white presence that emerged in our lives in the late 1950s: some segments of the white church. Because Beverly’s father was a minister like mine, he reminded me of the first white people I encountered who struggled to resist the system: white missionaries and clergy. They worshiped and worked alongside us and actually showed up in our lives in the late 1950s: some segments of the white church. Because Beverly’s father was a minister like mine, he reminded me of the first white people I encountered who struggled to resist the system: white missionaries and clergy. They worshiped and worked alongside us and actually showed up in our lives as human beings. They spoke out against racism at the risk of losing the comforts of white privilege, as well as being at risk of physical harm and death. All along my parents had told me that, though it might seem like all white people were dangerous, each person was to be encountered as an individual and that there were white people who did not agree with the status quo. It was through my white missionaries and clergy like Beverly’s father that my parents’ teachings about this aspect of race proved to be true to me for the first time in my life.
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baby about a caricatured, black, island dictator – suitable for production in Provincetown, Massachusetts, when written in 1920, no doubt, but painfully dated now or even by 1964). I carried thoughts of the play with me to the dining hall, where all of the scholarship boys and some of the rest of us earned free lunches by working as waiters. And after we had served our classmates, I must have been regaling my buddies at the waiters’ table with a synopsis and some choice excerpts from O’Neill’s drama, complete with dialect. Bob Hyde didn’t say anything. He just leaned over and stuck his face close to my face with a broad “Hi there” smile. I got the point and mumbled an apology. Well, thank you, Bob (as I probably didn’t say at the time). I needed that, and I have been trying to do better ever since. Black experience is largely for black people to describe and us to listen. Bob Hyde taught me in an instant that for a white person to opine too knowingly on racial matters or, worse yet, mimic, is presumptuous and downright rude. I hope I have been listening more, and listening more sensitively through the years to African-American college classmates, newspaper colleagues and Leadership Florida friends. I could still stand to listen some more. Like Beverly Coyle, I am freshly curious about whether this sheltered aspect of my youth was simply a matter of numbers and probability – or had it, somehow, been arranged? So I asked my mother the other day. Could any of those few black people living north of downtown Minneapolis have moved down to our part of town in the Southwest corner of the city? (There were none at neighborhood Robert Fulton Elementary School.) Or were there restrictive covenants? My sweet-natured mom frowned slightly as she paused to recall. “There probably were covenants, maybe regarding Jews too.” My family is of mixed Anglo-Saxon stock by way of Canada, so I doubt I could summon any material to write an elegant apologia for our ancestral slave-holdings. Still, right there in open-minded Minneapolis, there may have been a bit more of a system of separation in place than met my young eyes. For a studious, valedictorian type, I was pretty slow on the uptake on this one. But another young man from Minnesota six years my senior, named Bob Zimmerman, had it pretty well figured out when he wrote in the mid-’60s:

Come mothers and fathers throughout the land
And don’t criticize what you can’t understand
Your sons and you daughters are beyond your command
The old road is rapidly aging
Please get out of the new one if you can’t lend a hand
For the times, they are a changin’.

Venetian Pool, Coral Gables. Just one of the many historic places you can visit on your travels in Florida.

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Memoirists on tour in snapshots they took of each other: Bill Maxwell stands next to the Crescent City Public Library, successor to a collection at the nearby Women's Club that exposed him to the world of books; Beverly Coyle in front of Memorial Methodist Church in Fernandina Beach where her father was pastor.