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Opinions

From Tiber Island to Ferguson: A childhood is different after race-related riots



By Melissa T. Shultz August 26

My mother's parting words were about tear gas: "If you're hit by some and can't breathe and your eyes begin to burn, cover your face with this cloth."

It was 1968 and my family was living in Washington, D.C., where I was born. Our townhouse was in Tiber Island, a new, middle-class community in Southwest. We had moved there the year before from nearby River Park. From the perspective of an 8-year-old, it was ideal: places to play, a neighborhood pool and a lot of kids. I didn't notice the angst the adults were going through or that it was considered an "experiment" blending a poor, mostly black community with a middle-class one made up of both blacks and whites.

My best friend at the time was black (I am white and Jewish). The day after [Martin Luther King Jr. was shot](#), I was at her apartment when her grandparents told me I had to leave and go home — it wasn't safe for me there. "Safe from what?" I asked. "From angry people," they said. "Black people who are angry at white people." I left their apartment in tears, thinking they didn't like me anymore.

The next day, to protect ourselves from the black people who were angry with us, my family and another piled into a single car and drove to a second-rate motel in West Virginia. We stayed a couple of nights, spending most of our time gathered around the television to watch the looting, the riots and the torching of streets where my family once walked and shopped.

When we returned, there was a curfew. National Guardsmen seemed to be everywhere, rifles ready, including on my route to school. That's when my mother handed me my lunchbox, along with a wet washcloth. "Keep it in your hands until you get to school," she said in her no-nonsense way.

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Even before then, things were not idyllic in this neighborhood experiment. My mother, a first-generation American, had insisted on moving our family to the city from Maryland. She and my father had wanted to raise their children in the District, to be part of what she called the “wider world.” She volunteered in community groups, including the Urban Service Corps, which helped underfunded schools and teachers in the classroom, and the controversial Tri-School Program, which had two main goals: to improve and equalize the quality of education for all children in our underserved Southwest schools, and to promote integration.

It worked in some ways, most of which went over my head. To me, it was just school. Outside the classroom, things were more complicated, particularly on the playgrounds and while walking home from school. There were fights with fists, with knives, with words, even with pencils. My older brother was robbed going to the store for my mother. I was robbed bringing a record album to school for show and tell. When the principal made me walk from classroom to classroom with him to identify the perpetrator, I pretended I didn’t recognize him.

Things deteriorated rapidly after King’s assassination. It didn’t take long for the middle class to move out — black and white middle class, though my mother still calls it “white flight.” My folks decided we had to move, too. After a decade of trying to change things, they were burnt out. We stayed in the city, but we moved to Northwest, where there was less crime, though the schools and race relations were only marginally better. Busing had created a whole new set of issues.

My mother still talks about the move with sadness. When I asked her recently whether she harbors any bad feelings about it, she said, “You have to work to get past the bad feelings and focus instead on bringing about change. It’s the only way to bring people together and create respect and understanding.”

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As I watched the news about the riots and looting in Ferguson, Mo., the thought was unavoidable: The more things change, the more they remain the same.

I miss my childhood friend. We lost touch decades ago, and though I’ve tried to find her, I haven’t been able to. I understand now that her grandparents were trying to protect me. It’s too late to tell them, but I’ll never forget.

The writer lives in Dallas.


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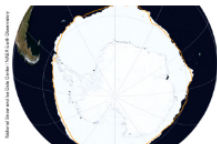


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actuary1

8/30/2014 10:43 AM CDT

Anger, resulting in violence, will always exist in human beings because it's part of a survival mechanism. But it can be minimized through education, a satisfactory standard of living, and parents who don't perpetuate hatred—whether based on race or religion or sexual identification—by teaching it to their children. To do that, the parents need the education and the standard of living...and the cycle continues.

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pweisbe1

8/27/2014 9:31 AM CDT

While this seems like a sad state of affairs, there have been many instances of racial advancement that could not have existed before the civil rights movement. One major example is that more Blacks are moving back to the South. Another is the number of Blacks in Congress now (43 representatives and one senator). Of course, we have a president who is African and White American. I see some of the resistance to him as racist, ideological, and policy oriented but a majority of voting Americans put him in office twice.

I do not want to seem ignorant of the many obstacles left but at age 72, I have seen an overall positive social change during my lifetime with setbacks like Ferguson always around.

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JTroy

8/27/2014 7:05 AM CDT

This author forgot a couple of things.. There was no justification for the shooting of King. The justification for shooting Brown is just beginning to be told.

There is one thing similar. Black people riot, loot, pillage and steal. Whites do too but it is just much more prevalent in the black community. They call it justified. They want openness and then complain when Brown's theft and Johnson's indictment for theft and false testimony come to light.

Blacks wonder why white people like this author's parents, move out and their neighborhood becomes a slum riddled with crime. Then, of course, they call on the police.

There are many good black people. Most keep silent because they fear retribution from their own. Those brave enough to speak out are chastised.. How many blacks have you seen in Ferguson complaining about or stopping the looters? How many have you seen speak up and tell the officer's side of the story in what they saw?. Then, the black leaders cry race and complain about why nothing has changed. Nothing will change until the black community stops defending criminals, cleans up their neighborhoods and teaches their children right from wrong.

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jack406

8/27/2014 9:34 AM CDT

Actually I've seen a lot of very brave black people in Ferguson standing in front of the stores with their hands linked and telling the looters to go away.

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