

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

I was born in Birmingham, Alabama, the heart of the deep South, in 1933. Although that city had about a 45 percent black population, I grew up knowing only white people. While I might drive through part of the city that had black residents, and see black people in the downtown area, for all practical purposes our lives were lived with other whites. Businesses that served all races likely had signs such as "Colored Entrance" or "white" and "colored" signs on drinking fountains.

Any black high school student had to attend Parker High School in the downtown area, while white students could choose from at least five high schools scattered around the city. One might easily assume that black people were here to be subservient to whites; black professionals were limited to serving their own race. The all-white police force did not have to worry about using unnecessary force: there were no cameras, and a judge would always take the word of the policeman over that of a protesting black person.

The "n" word was the standard label for a black person, though some would use the word "colored" instead. That we should send all blacks back to Africa was a fairly common idea. That blacks should remain "in their place" was a widespread view: that did not refer to a physical place, but it meant their having a subordinate status to whites. A black person might come work in your yard, cook your meals, or take care of your children, as long as the subservient status was clear.

The two Birmingham newspapers agreed that segregation was the correct arrangement. Suggested integration was termed "mixing." A white man who was running for an office in the city was photographed shaking hands with a black man by his opponent. Distribution of this photo assured the defeat of the man seen shaking hands. The city once passed a law that made it illegal to have any game or sporting event that included members of both races. (The law was later nullified.)

The Ku Klux Klan would occasionally march in their hooded costumes. Singer Nat King Cole was doing a concert in the city in 1956 when he was beaten up by some Klansmen. (This incident is mentioned in the film, "The Green Book.") Most of the people I knew had the vague feeling that the Klan was not a good thing, but few would venture to do or say anything about it.

My family was devoutly religious and attended church faithfully. I do not remember any sermon or teaching on the race question in church or even in school (until college). Most people just took segregation for granted without reflecting on the subject. I was fortunate to have an older brother who urged me to think for myself. He gave me a book or two that spoke of equality. Through reading and reflection, my views crystallized. In 1954 I found myself agreeing with the Supreme Court decision against segregation in public schools. A hundred miles to the south of Birmingham, the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 marked the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, and brought Martin Luther King, Jr. to national and even international attention.

While a number of white people supported these movements, a majority (at least in the South) only hardened their segregationist views. Billboards reading "Impeach Earl Warren" began to appear in Southern states. (Warren was the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court that had ruled against segregation in schools.) There were hostile feelings about "outside agitators," such as the freedom riders who traveled through the South to test segregation laws. The thought was that the people of Alabama were the ones to make decisions for their own state. By "people of Alabama," they did not mean all the people but the white power structure.

In 1955 I enrolled in a Methodist seminary in Evanston, Illinois. I was getting settled into my dorm when a young black man walked in and said, "I'm Phil Harley and I believe this is my room." He and I were roommates for my first semester there, and I later invited him to speak at a church where I served. I am sorry to say that he was the first black friend I ever had. As might be expected, the seminary only

reinforced my views on the race question. A few years later, I completed seminary and took my wife and two children to be a minister in Alabama.

While some ministers and others were willing to speak out on race, most whites in Alabama in that era held to segregationist views. A group called the Methodist Laymen's Union openly defended segregation, and took a dim view of young preachers who disagreed. One minister, who later became a friend, preached equality and had a cross burned in front of his church. I got in some minor trouble when a local paper printed my letter, which agreed with Martin Luther King. The national church was calling for "a desegregated church in a desegregated society." A group called Christian Social Concerns (later Church and Society) centered on the issue of race. They sponsored a meeting in Chicago, which I attended, with King as the keynote speaker.

I joined the Alabama Council on Human Relations, the only bi-racial group I knew of in the state. We usually met in black churches, since attempting that in a white church would be awkward. It was instructive to hear black ministers give their perspectives on the issues of the day. It was a moving experience to hold hands in a circle and sing a song such as "We Shall Overcome," which has a line, "black and white together, we shall overcome some day."

National events continued: sit-ins at restaurants and other places, freedom riders, a large March on Washington featuring King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, demonstrations in Birmingham (where police used fire hoses on peaceful demonstrators) and elsewhere. In 1963 alone, there were 40 unsolved racially-motivated bombings in Birmingham. The worst was the bombing of a black church in the downtown area that killed four black girls. I still recall how shaken the TV announcer was when he reported this on local news. (A civil rights museum now stands across the street from that church.)

In 1964 I met with the committee on Christian Social Concerns, which reports to the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church. I submitted a resolution that the four Methodist-related colleges

in the state, all of which were white only, be open to people of all races. The committee, fearing that the annual conference would simply reject it, agreed to write letters to the presidents of the colleges and urge them to welcome people of all races, a step they eventually took. A few years later, the annual conference agreed by a **one** vote margin to integrate with black Methodists.

An interesting event took place about 1970. A black girl had been attending the day care of the First Baptist Church, and the girl's mother, with the approval of the minister, said she would like to join the church. But new members in the Baptist church have to be voted on, and word got out that a black woman was attempting to join. Those opposed sought to bring as many voters to the church as they could, and her requested membership was voted down. A prominent physician rose from the congregation and said, "I cannot be a member of a church that will not accept all people as members," and walked out. Some 255 people walked out with him, including the entire staff of the church. The protesters formed a church of their own, and the First Baptist Church re-located and began to accept all people.

In the late 1960s, there were race riots in several cities in the country. A committee that studied the riots blamed white racism and listed discrimination in employment, housing, and police practices as major underlying grievances. **Over 50 years later**, the nation went through another period of protest, particularly on the subject of police brutality. The main protest group was called "Black Lives Matter," whose members demonstrated in large numbers in an overwhelmingly peaceful manner. One wonders how long our nation will take to recognize that black lives **do** matter. I am reminded of Bob Dylan's song, "How many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free? The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind."