

## Chapter 7. ANTI-RACISM

The Big Jolts that drastically affect people's ideas about race are either emotional or rational. The emotional may be triggered by an incident that happens to oneself, or by one that a person sees happening to others; the rational reach one through discussion or reading. The races of the people mentioned in the following anecdotes are immaterial; we are interested instead in what shocks break down stereotypes about race and allow people to see individuals as they really are.

For the category of Personal Experiences, as small a thing as having to use a particular toilet may spark a change in one's life, as happened to **Diane Nash**. She was brought up in the Midwest and although she was Black, she did not really understand the meaning of segregation in the southern United States (Powledge, 1991, 207ff). Then, in 1959, she transferred to Fisk University in Nashville from Howard University in Washington, DC. When she and a date went to the Tennessee State Fair, **she approached the washroom and saw for the first time two doors labelled WHITE WOMEN and COLORED WOMEN. "I remember that I got really outraged,"** she said. (Victoria Gray, a Black, was equally enraged at washroom separatism, even though she had been raised in Mississippi and only been away from segregation while spending a year in Detroit.) Nash talked to other Fisk students about this, but they seemed apathetic-- as if nothing could be done about segregation; then she heard of workshops on racism a few blocks from campus that she could attend. She learned about non-violence technique there, a practice she thought at first could not work. Even so, she knew she had to become involved in the Black movement. Although she was almost paralyzed with fear at what might happen, she led sit-ins at lunch counters in Nashville that would not serve Blacks, and headed a march to talk to the Mayor of Nashville about discrimination.

From that time on, Nash became one of the leaders of the Black movement. She served time in jail, dropped out of university, became deeply involved in the Freedom Ride in which an integrated bus drove into the deep south, and assisted with voter education. Her activism helped bring about the Voting Rights Act because of which many Black people in the United States were elected to public office. Nash, who continues to work for oppressed groups, said recently, "There is a satisfaction... that has to do with the fact that-- this isn't modest, but-- with the fact that my living has made a difference on the planet. And I love that. I really do." Her life was changed forever when she was first compelled to use a "colored" washroom at the Tennessee State Fair.

**Harriet Beecher Stowe** (1811-1896) was jolted by the death of her child to think clearly about slavery (Beach, 1967, 209,237). She was born and raised as a devout Episcopalian in New England, and remained deeply religious throughout her life. After marrying Prof. Calvin Stowe when she was 25, she moved with him to Cincinnati, across the Ohio River from the slave state of Kentucky. She bore and raised six children there which kept her busy, but she was alert to stories she heard about slaves, and remembered incidents that she witnessed. Had she been raised on a southern plantation, she would probably have been callous and indifferent to slavery, as were

most Southerners. Being a New England woman, however, she found the novelty of slavery compelling despite its horror.

In the summer of 1849, her infant son Charley died of cholera that was sweeping Cincinnati. **His death made her fully realize what slave women must suffer when their children were forcibly taken from them.** She decided that she had to write a book condemning slavery. She noted that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could only have been written by a mother who knew what it was to have a child snatched from her arms forever with only a moment's notice. It was at her baby's "dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her. In those depths of sorrow which seemed to me immeasurable, it was my only prayer to God that such anguish might not be suffered in vain.... I allude to this because I have often felt that much that is in that book ('Uncle Tom') had its roots in the awful scenes and bitter sorrows of that summer."

When President Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1863, he is reported to have said, "Is this the little woman who made this great war?" She had published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1851-52 which had great influence on the movement for the abolition of slavery and helped trigger the Civil War of 1861.

As the anecdote about Mrs Stowe indicates, there is a close connection between one's own experience and that of others; when she lost her own baby, she could empathize fully with other mothers who had lost their infants. It is not surprising, then, that many people were galvanized when they saw others undergo an emotional trauma. For example, Powledge (1991, 21ff) writes that for every Black American over the age of 30 there is probably an "incident" from their childhood "in which the difference between the races was suddenly, clearly, vividly, chillingly made apparent". For **Charles Jones**, a middle-class Black boy in South Carolina, it was knowing a Black school teacher who went into a drugstore to have a prescription filled. When the white pharmacist handed her the medicine, she thanked him, but did not call him "sir" as he asked. **She begged his pardon for omitting the "sir", but he slapped her hard anyway.** He wanted to reinforce the message that "You are colored and we are white, and we are your superiors." Jones was devastated by the pharmacist's action which would later help make him a devoted activist for the Black movement.

At university Jones had excellent teachers who made him question his belief in the Bible and in the American way of life that excluded him because he was Black, and made him recall the incident in which the school teacher was degraded. He became an ardent member of the civil rights movement for Blacks involved in Charlotte, North Carolina, sit-ins, Freedom Rides, campaigns for votes, and serving time in jail. He devoured Krishnalal Shidharani's book *War Without Violence* which discussed the importance of non-violent resistance.

Jones, son of a minister and student at a seminary, had planned to become a minister himself, but he changed his mind after the summer of 1962. He had seen a minister approach the mayor of Albany, Georgia, and obsequiously ask for fairness, which was denied. He had also seen an influential Black lawyer, C.B. King, loudly address a court of law to demand the release of Black prisoners because the actions of the police against them had been unconstitutional. He realized that to function best in

society he needed to use the language of power that belonged to lawyers. He said in an interview, "It was clear in my mind that my best resources were going to be in learning the law and practicing it."

After he earned his law degree, Jones moved to Charlotte where he set up his law practice. He often represented poor people, people without power, because this had been important to him ever since he first was aware of the injustice suffered by the abused school teacher, and ever since he decided to become a lawyer to combat such injustice.

The Black lawyer **Chevene Bowers King** who had so impressed Charles Jones had himself experienced a Big Jolt while growing up (Powledge, 1991, 338ff). As a young lad he was playing with others on swings in a school yard when a white man he had known as the grocery boy drove up in a police prowl car. **He had become a rookie policeman and wanted to show off his new power in the neighborhood. He did so by drawing his gun (which scared King away) and arresting the boys he could catch for vagrancy.** King said in an interview, "This experience made me to know intuitively, I presume, that there was something wrong with this kind of symbol of the law. This was my first such experience of this nature, and a very traumatic one, too."

King studied at two universities before attending law school and becoming a successful lawyer. Ironically, King met the policeman, then a sheriff, later on in his career when the sheriff told him that as a Black he was not allowed to sit where other lawyers sat. King ignored him, and the judge agreed that he could sit as a lawyer, to the bully's annoyance.) King's career, triggered by the tyranny of the police rookie "incident" in his youth, was largely spent working for Black people and for the Black movement.

**Rosa Parks'** (1913-2005) experience in Montgomery, Alabama, gave thousands if not millions of people a Jolt when they heard about it (Parks, 1992, 111,116,149). In fact, it triggered the Black Civil Rights movement of the United States on December 1, 1955, when she refused to obey the law. When Parks climbed onto a bus after her day's work as a tailor's assistant, she took a seat in the middle section. The law declared that Blacks had to move to the back when whites boarded a bus and wanted seats, so that when whites entered at the next stop and one white man was left standing, **the bus driver ordered the four people in the front seats of the Black section to move back and stand with the other Blacks. The other three people did so, but Rosa Parks did not.** She shifted over to the window seat, then sat there until the police came to arrest her. She says, "I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had wanted a case to test the legality of bus segregation in Montgomery. Rosa Parks proved the ideal candidate-- as a woman she would get more sympathy than a man, and she had a good reputation. Before her case was tried, though, Blacks decided to boycott the Montgomery buses, for which Parks (along with 88 others) was again arrested for boycotting without "a just cause or legal excuse."

Media attention to Parks' action and to the bus boycott mobilized many people across the country on behalf of civil rights. It led to sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and finally to changes in American law to ban segregation, giving Blacks a new sense of dignity, pride and power.

Perhaps because of his background, **Henry Schwarzschild** was sensitive to the horror of discrimination. As a Jew born in Germany in 1925, he was always aware of political injustice (Powledge 1991, 236ff); rather than be killed by the Nazis, his family moved to America in 1939. Despite this experience, he claims that he was at that time "peculiarly unsophisticated and blindly unaware" of the problems of segregation.

Schwarzschild was jolted out of this condition five years later when undergoing basic army training in Georgia. **He attended a Passover service and meal celebrating the liberation from slavery in Egypt of Jews in the distant past for which Jewish soldiers had been given a free evening. However, he found this group was being served by Black soldiers doing extra duty.** Although at the time he didn't know a single Black person, he was so outraged by this that he complained to the chaplain, pointing out the irony of the situation. Far from being understanding, the chaplain told him to sit down and be quiet or he would be court-martialled.

With this new awareness, Schwarzschild was ready to fight for the Black cause when it erupted. In the 1960s he demonstrated in Lexington against inequality, was jailed following a Freedom Ride, and participated in many other movement events. He became head of the capital punishment project of the American Civil Liberties Union and continued to work for justice issues. His upbringing prepared him for political activism, but it was initially triggered by the Jewish Passover service of 1944.

**Sylvia Bernstein** (b1915), who was also Jewish, grew up in Washington, DC, in a working-class socialist family which looked toward a new future in a new world (Bernstein, 1989, 35). The Big Jolt which forced her to become involved in the movement to desegregate the lunch counters of Washington so that Blacks as well as whites could eat there comfortably was a visual one. She said, **"I was in Murphy's five-and-dime one day and I saw a Negro woman who was very pregnant and she had another little baby with her. And she had to eat standing up. I never forgot it."**

Bernstein became an activist on behalf of Blacks after this, organizing sit-ins for Washington lunch counters and battling for the integration of Washington swimming pools.

**John Fleming**, curator of the National Afro-American Museum, received his Big Jolt when he visited an exhibit in Washington displaying 150 years of artifacts stereotyping Blacks (Tilove, 1994). In the past, some people liked to collect Black memorabilia -- a Black mammy jar to hold cookies, a Jolly Darkie Target Game, a Jolly Nigger Bank in which you put a coin in the man's palm and he'd swallow it, a windup Amos 'n Andy car which would run and sputter, run and sputter. They represented Blacks as servile and foolish. Each of these racist objects may have seemed quaint and harmless when viewed alone, but the effect of many of them in one place was overpowering to

Fleming.

He said, "For the first time it really struck me how pervasive racism was as reflected in the material culture. It was really overwhelming. And while I don't believe these stereotypical images say anything particularly about African-Americans, I think they say a whole lot about the larger society."

A leading collector in Washington, Jeanette Carson, agreed with him: "**I think about the mentality of a people who would go to these extremes to create such ridiculous and exaggerated images all in order to degrade us as a race of people,**" she said.

Big Jolts are not necessarily emotional as are the above examples. They can be rational, too, as **L.C. Dorsey** (who used her initials rather than her first names, which she disliked) found. She was born in 1938 in Mississippi and educated at school despite plantation owners' attempts to keep the young working each day in the cotton fields (Powledge, 1991, 3ff). Her parents made sure that she had a consciousness of being Black as she grew up. She experienced her Big Jolt when she was 13. She knew that although her family had been working on one plantation for 21 years, her father had never been able to get out of debt despite his best efforts. She decided that the answer was to keep records, so she could work out exactly what the family owed and what it earned during the cotton season.

When her father went to ask for his money after the cotton was picked, she gave him her account book so that he and the owner could discuss any discrepancies between her accounts and those of the owner. **When she got home from school, however, she found that he had again been cheated despite her documentation.** She was devastated: "I had played by the rules as I understood the rules, and I had applied my learning in one-room classrooms to solve the problem," but to no avail. She realized then that fairness had nothing to do with anything. "That set the foundation of a woman becoming ready for the Movement," she said later.

Dorsey married, had six living children, and had been forced off the plantations when the Movement came to her town of Shelby, Mississippi, in 1964. She was enthralled to be able to help with voter registration and do her part for civil rights. She finally landed a job at Head Start in 1966, but continued to work for the Movement so effectively that she was on the Ku Klux Klan's most wanted list. She went on to earn a doctorate in social work and become director in a health centre. Her Big Jolt when she was 13 would be the start of her Movement efforts and her successful career helping Blacks.

**Rumer Godden** (1907-1998) was galvanized on the subject of racism after reading a book (Godden, 1987, 67). She grew up mostly in India, where her father worked for a steamship company. Like all British in India who kept largely to themselves, her family lived far better than did most Indians whose land they were occupying.

When Godden was nineteen, she read *A Passage to India*; she writes, "as if I had been a kitten born blind, **my eyes were suddenly opened. Were we, the English in India, really like the Turtens, the McBrydes and the Callendars, those**

**righteous, insensitive characters?** Was this how people saw us, those people in London whom we had set up almost like gods? I know now that E.M. Forster for all his truth was biased and, too, ignorant of the best and valuable role of the British in India but, at that time, the shock was complete. Once again, a character in a book was more powerful than anyone actual; Mrs Moore of *A Passage to India* changed my life."

Godden realized that unlike Mrs Moore, she had made no effort to learn about the real India and its people among whom she lived. Immediately she made plans to learn Hindi, and began to work in an agricultural college where she met many Indian students and was able to appraise the countryside from horseback. She was never again able to view India as she had in the past, and her new consciousness would be evident in her books.

As another example of a rational jolt, a Native American woman was so shaken when she read a biography of **Douglas Cardinal** (b 1934), the Native architect of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, that she was activated to work for Native rights (Boddy, 1989, 12,28). The incident that affected her had also radicalized Cardinal himself because he then realized the importance of newspaper bias. Although Cardinal had Métis blood on both his mother's and his father's side, he was not taught to be proud of this heritage. Indeed, when his father took him as a boy to visit an old Blackfoot woman living on an Alberta reserve, it was a decade before Cardinal realized that this was his own great-grandmother.

Cardinal was a student at the University of Texas in Austin when he experienced systemic racial discrimination for the first time. He was socializing with some Arab student friends at a beer garden when they were attacked by members of the University of Texas athletics department fraternity. Cardinal and his friends fought back with such spirit that members of both sides were hospitalized. The next day, **the newspaper headed the story "Foreign students start riot." Cardinal was so angry at this biased report that he wrote a fierce rebuttal in the campus paper.** He later pursued the incident through the university tribunal system, which eventually expelled the fraternity men who had started the melee. This incident remained with him, coloring the rest of his life, so that he studied native spirituality and became involved in many Indian and Métis issues. In his wonderful architectural work he has been able to synthesize his native sensibility with Western technology.

**Paul Yee** (b 1956) received a Big Jolt not through the written word, but by a comment from one of his teachers (Lacey, 1988). Yee grew up in Vancouver caught between two cultures, Chinese and mainstream Canadian. He associated Chinatown with being poor and being different, characteristics he disliked. During his final year at high school, he went to a Chinese-Canadian "awareness and identity" conference where he asked a teacher, **"Why are we talking about a bunch of coolies who worked on the railway?" The teacher replied, "Because your grandfather was probably one of those coolies".** Yee says, "It was a moment that changed the direction of my life. I had so completely adopted the mainstream white view of Chinese history that I had nothing but contempt for my own past."

Yee studied languages and then history at university, becoming an archivist working on the culture of the Chinese in British Columbia. He found that their history in Vancouver was one of racism, a tradition that is now resurfacing when the subject is Hong Kong money and rising real estate values. In 1988, when he was only 32, he published the book *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver*.

Rationality comes with knowing people or places rather than from reacting to stereotypes about them. Often people discriminate because, and even though, they do not know the people they are discriminating against. An example is the reaction of white Americans to **Robert Robinson** (b 1907), a Black man, who arrived in Russia in 1930 to work as a toolmaker (Robinson, 1988, 58). He and the other American specialists immediately joined Russians on a boat trip down the Volga River. On the second night, **Robinson was asked by a Russian woman to dance; the tune was "I can't give you anything but love, baby." The white Americans didn't like to see this.** They taunted Robinson and protested the presence of a Black on the dance floor by vacating the floor themselves. Robinson writes, "The Americans did not dance again that evening. But they did remain, and saw other Russian women ask me to dance, including some who had been their partners. The Russian women had helped to smash the social barrier that the white Americans had put up. This was a great lesson for my fellow countrymen, and by the next day their desire to dance with Russian girls overcame their need to hold me in contempt because of my dark skin. The next night they were foxtrotting alongside me on the dance floor, no longer making snide comments."

Robinson's troubles weren't over, though. He was soon assaulted by other white Americans, but he sued them and won his case. On a Sunday afternoon following this court decision, he was invited to a party given by his factory's chief electrical engineer. As the host introduced him to the other guests, he noticed **three white American men becoming more and more nervous as Robinson approached; they realized if they weren't civil to him, they might lose their jobs.** The men finally all shook hands, then relaxed somewhat as they were entertained by piano music and ate refreshments. Robinson writes, "Conversation gradually flowed easily between the Americans and me; we even shared genuine laughter. After a delightful three hours I believed that I understood better why so many white Americans feel the way they do about blacks. They never really get to know us, true feelings are never shared, and myths about blacks come to be accepted as true. By the time I left the party, I believed that the three white Americans now saw me in a favorable light, whereas before they had viewed me with suspicion and dislike from afar."

There is no way of knowing if these white Americans had really changed their racist ways, but Robinson was never again attacked during his two-year stay in Stalingrad, and gradually white Americans began to accept him as a fellow compatriot.

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