

"Tears in Our Eyes"

By Alan Harrison

It was 1968. I was six years old. I was scared to death. I had never been this scared. Those kids were coming on buses and they were going to beat my face in every day from now on. The older kids said those N-WORD kids liked nothing better than to beat up little WHITE kids and I was just going to have to live with it every day.

When I was six the only black person I knew was Catherine. She was a sweet lady. She cleaned all the houses on the block and everyone loved her. I didn't know she was black. I heard the n-word regularly but I never connected it with her.

I think it was the first week of first grade. Black kids were coming on buses. The grown-ups were "off". Kids can tell when something is up. The supreme court had decided that segregated schools were not OK. I just knew that black kids were coming on buses and they were going to beat my face in because that is what the older kids told me.

I wasn't big, I was kinda chubby. I didn't play sports. I was always the last one picked for any team. I liked to read. I was everything a boy wasn't supposed to be.

Now I was going to have to fight or get beat up. I knew the alternative for me was "get beat up".

They didn't come the first day of the school year. It was delayed a few days. We were all lined up and the black kids had to line in past all of us. I remember how surprised I was. These kids weren't black, they looked brown to me. I thought they were going to be black like a blackboard.

I was so scared I was holding back tears. I saw this little black kid filing by and I focused on him. He was smaller than me, probably Kindergarten. He looked scared. Really scared. I could see the tears in his eyes. I know now that it was even worse for him than it was for me. He was leaving the comfort of his neighborhood and coming to a new school - my school. He surely had heard worse stories than I had, and he surely must've been more afraid than me. We locked eyes. It was clear that I could see how scared he was - and that he could see how scared I was. It was one of those moments where you connect with another human being without saying anything, but you both know it. I looked in his eyes and said to him, "I like brown." He seemed surprised but suddenly looked hopeful. He looked back at me, with those tears, and said, "I like white." (Pause)

That moment was profound - and I don't remember anything else that happened after that. We had a few black kids in our class and we all went on with our lives. I never told anyone about this until now.

That moment taught me that everybody is scared, but we just don't talk about it.

I knew about being scared. I never talked about how scary it was being threatened with violence growing up in a Catholic neighborhood, the only Jew in town. About how scary it was being told that I somehow made other people poor, and that I was going to hell, or that I was going to get beat up because I killed Jesus. I remember how confusing that was. How could I have killed Jesus. I never told my mom I was scared. And I sure never told my dad. I knew that boys weren't supposed to get scared.

My dad was a cop when I was little. My uncle is a retired state trooper. I saw and heard a lot of racist things growing up. I grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood outside Philadelphia and I heard some terrible things. Things I wouldn't even write down, let alone say.

My Dad and uncle had hard jobs. They said some mean things, really mean things, but they were good to me, really good - they were my heros. They were big and strong and could do anything. But now I know that they got scared sometimes too. My Dad always seemed proud of the fact

that he never used his weapon on duty. Me and that 6 year old are really, really glad he never did....

I'm well into my 50's now, but that little six-year-old scared kid is still with me. He stays with me, right by my side. Despite what we may have heard sometimes as a kid, we get to move through life and decide how we will treat others. That little boy still wants to panic if he sees someone coming that might "beat his face in" I have to tell him, "No, it's OK. We're fine. That is just another person and they are probably scared too." He and I still have that conversation, all the time, sometimes I have to rescue him from the fear, one person at a time.

That little boy and I still remember the things we heard and the lessons we learned growing up. Sometimes we don't want to remember ALL of those things but they are all always there, both good and bad, they don't just go away. But we know deep in our souls it will all be OK. While we know we can't change anything from the past, we CAN take responsibility for what we believe, for what we say, and most importantly for what we do in the world.

I like having that little kid to go through life with together. He makes me smarter, makes me kinder, makes me more human, and still teaches me things all the time. He reminds me that everyone is human, everyone is scared, everyone feels pain, and we are all struggling.

He- better than me - acknowledges the tears in our eyes and even more importantly, he can see the tears in someone else's eyes long long before I can. He reminds me that anyone can have compassion and that when I see the tears in someone else's eyes, I can reach out to them... ..,"... I ..." "I like brown."