

With One Exception

by Paul Todd

Mr. Ballard was an excellent teacher of history and social studies at my school, St. Anthony's Catholic elementary in the West End section of Atlanta. West End in those days, was sort of a faded version of its more prosperous past, and in the 1970s, was undergoing what real estate agents would euphemistically call "transitioning", which just meant that white people were moving out as fast as they could and black people were moving in.

That had pretty much run its course by the time of this story, about 1978. My parents had both grown up in the area, though, and saw little reason to leave. My mother had actually attended St. Anthony's in the 1930s, and my eight siblings had attended before me.

In this little school of 250 or so students, I wasn't just the only white kid in the *eighth* grade, I was the only white kid in *any* grade. It was pretty easy to find me in the class picture. It wasn't that big of an issue though. I had grown up with most of my classmates, and while I never forgot I was different, I didn't have to fight my way through school or anything like that.

When you're in the eighth grade every adult is old, but I would guess Mr. Ballard was about 30. He was a tall, imposing, and serious black man. He held his students to a high standard and he tolerated no nonsense. He wasn't mean or unfriendly, but even as kids we knew he was somebody not to be trifled with, a person of authority and a person to be listened to.

And so it was that on this particular day, Mr. Ballard had deviated from the lesson plan and was impressing on us the need for hard work and education if we hoped to accomplish anything in life. He was standing in the front of the room, speaking calmly but in a booming voice that really amplified the importance of what he wanted to say.

Our desks were arranged in our usual rows, with me somewhere in the middle of about twenty or so students. When I think of that day, I can still see the tall windows of the un-air-conditioned room, I can see the old pencil sharpener on the wall, and even smell the ever-present chalkboard dust.

Mr. Ballard wasn't lecturing us or bad-mouthing us, but passing on what I now know is timeless wisdom based on his own experience as a product of tumultuous times. If my impression of his age is about right, he grew up in the heart of the civil rights movement, experiencing or being witness to segregation,

sit-ins, protest marches, race riots, affirmative action - everything.

So without fidgeting, or eye rolling, without the usual boredom of fourteen year-olds, we listened intently. I was deeply engaged in the message as Mr. Ballard said the thing that has stayed with me forty years later. He said, "And with one exception, all of you in this room will have to work that much harder to get ahead." The words hit me like a stone: "With one exception..." I could feel the eyes of all my classmates turn in my direction as they each immediately knew who he meant.

I remember the distinct feeling of trying to make myself physically smaller, that if I could just disappear under the desk, they could go on without me. I sat very still, staring hard at the desk in front of me, gripping the edges tightly. I didn't make eye contact with anybody, trying not to attract further attention, and hoping the moment would mercifully pass.

I was suddenly conscious of a lot of things that had been happening around me, of every conversation that trailed off as I approached, of every awkward glance as the subject of white people came up, and of every time I realized I'd not been invited to a party or after-school event. I'd long learned to dismiss these small episodes, but as I sat in that classroom, I felt the full weight of all of them at once.

I have no recollection of anything that was said after that moment. I realized instantly that this conversation was not intended for me, nor for my benefit, and the rest of the discussion is simply erased from my memory. Neither Mr. Ballard nor any of my classmates ever mentioned it again. In hindsight, I think he was just passing on life lessons, trying to help young black kids who needed to know how the world worked. And I suspect he probably softened the message a little bit because I was in the room with them.

That I was a white kid in a black environment was not exactly a news flash - there were many small reminders of that. I'd often been the only white person on a bus, or in a store, and I'd been the only white player on a baseball team - or in the whole league, for that matter. But maybe because this one snuck up on me the way it did, this really caused me to recognize what it felt like to be the "other", to be somebody who was allowed to be present but not included. I had been deliberately excluded from the conversation while I was sitting in the room, and that was new.

Now it's not lost on me that a person of color or a woman or someone with a different sexual orientation can probably come up with thousands of stories just like this. And that's the first lesson I've tried to take from that day in 1978 - that in every

group there are people who feel different, who feel like they don't belong, or who are being left out, and for reasons that may not be as obvious as skin color.

I try to keep that lesson with me, and on my best days, use it to help others feel included. The fact is that Mr. Ballard gave me a gift that day. Intended or not, he gave me an experience and a point of view that most straight white men simply don't have. He also gave me an awareness of his original message, and I'm reminded of how right he was about the advantage I carry with me every day.