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# Separate But Equal

Literary Arts

Life Experience

## Separate But Equal

I have many fond memories of my school days in the Halifax County Public School System. I most remember my nurturing teachers, friendships with classmates, and my burning desire to learn. I was the youngest of six children, and for years, I watched my siblings leave for school. They always came home full of excitement and chatter about what happened at school that day. After supper, they gathered around the kitchen table to “get their lessons.” I would sit with them and scribble nonsensical characters on a sheet of paper and pretend I was in school. So, when it was my turn to go to school, I was ecstatic!

When I first started school, the disparities between the “white” schools and “colored” schools were lost on me. I was just so happy to be there. But little by little, it dawned on me that things weren’t quite right. I would hear my older siblings talk about how unfair it was that we walked three miles to school, while the white children whizzed pass us in shiny school buses. And I didn’t quite understand why those children shouted racial epithets at us. As time went on, I became increasingly aware of the differences.

When I saw the big, two-story school for white children, I wondered how it looked inside. I saw how beautiful it was outside with its manicured lawns and flowers. As I grew older, I increasingly wondered why their school was so different from mine, but I never really questioned it. I just knew things were unequal for people of color in every other aspect of life. Unequal housing, jobs, wages, churches, separate seating in the movie theater, no seating in restaurants. So, why not the schools?

My school was a dismal, sad little building, but nonetheless, it was my school. It was a weather-beaten Rosenwald school with only four rooms that lacked even the basic amenities. It didn't have indoor plumbing; I used the smelly, outdoor toilet which stank to high heaven. My school didn't have central heating. In late fall, a coal truck rumbled onto the school grounds and unceremoniously dumped a pile of coal. As you can imagine, after walking three miles to school in winter, the potbellied, coal burning stove provided little comfort. You have not lived until you have breathed anthracite coal fumes all day. My school didn't have central air conditioning or a window fan. When it was hot, I sweltered in my unairconditioned classroom. It's a miracle I even learned my A B Cs under such conditions.

Schools for people of color were furnished with hand-me-downs from the white school. The desks were old, scarred, and a few had rude words carved into them. My school didn't have a janitor, so we girls swept the floors and washed the chalk boards. The boys brought in the coal, kept the fires going, and gathered the trash. The schoolyard was mostly dirt with tufts of grass here and there. We didn't have much playground equipment; only a few baseball bats, some softballs, and a swing or two. There wasn't a sports field, no softball gloves, nor bags to mark bases. I didn't let the lack of equipment curb my enthusiasm for the game. We used trees as bases, drew a circle on the ground for the pitcher's mound, and enjoyed fun-filled baseball games. I played other games that didn't require sports equipment – hopscotch, tag, hide and seek, etc.

As I grew older, I became increasingly aware of the differences. Yet, I accepted things as they were because I was powerless to make a change. When in high school, I read about the Separate But Equal Doctrine. It was a legal doctrine in United States constitutional law, according to which racial segregation did not necessarily violate the Fourteenth Amendment of

the Constitution, which nominally guaranteed “equal protection” under the law. I realized the Fourteenth Amendment had been bent to its breaking point just to maintain the status quo. It was unethical, almost criminal. I was distressed to see the extent to which those lawmakers went to discriminate against me. What had I done? I wondered how any person, in good conscience, could adopt such a doctrine. I then had a Eureka moment! The workings of politics are without conscience. Later, I read about Brown versus the Board of Education, and I was hopeful. I was still powerless, but others were working on my behalf.

For the twelve years I was a student in Halifax County schools, I never received a textbook that was not used first used by a white student. My school got the used, outdated textbooks. And none of those textbooks had a single person in them that looked like me. Dick and Jane certainly did not look like me. Whether intentional or not, the absence of people who looked like me sent the subliminal message that only white people mattered. The one redeeming quality in the curriculum was Negro History Week. One week per year, I learned about heroes that looked like me. Even though I was only in first grade, I still remember the first African American hero I learned about – Dr. Ralph J. Bunche. I felt so proud!

Don’t get me wrong, I am not demeaning my school. I loved it. I am merely pointing out the inequities in the curriculums, learning materials, furnishings, and buildings. What I was taught inside my school molded, shaped, and gave me the tools I needed to have a successful career and lead a productive life. When I think about the partnership between Booker T. Washington, an educator and intellectual and Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, I am grateful. They were the reason I had a school to attend in the first place.

Even though it’s been fifty-eight years since I attended a Halifax County school, there are memories that still haunt me. In a recent Facebook posting, a former Halifax County school

white student reminisced about the wonderful homemade rolls served in his school's cafeteria. In the twelve years I attended Halifax County schools, there weren't any cafeterias in schools for people of color. My school sold four-ounce cartons of milk for two cents and sold ice cream treats for a nickel.

Another memory that haunts me happened during Hurricane Hazel in 1954. It was the deadliest hurricane of the season. As the storm approached, schools were dismissed early. At the time, my three older siblings were in high school and, therefore, rode the bus to school. When buses from their school reached main street, they were held in position until the buses from the white school were evacuated. My parents were just as worried about their children as the white parents were worried about theirs. It was just another example how people of color were treated as if they didn't matter.

Yes, my story is about the Separate But Equal Doctrine, but that's not my whole story. The other side of the coin of "separate but equal" is how my parents, teachers, church, and my community responded to it. Despite the inequities and hurt the Separate But Equal Doctrine caused, I was constantly told that I would "amount to something."

I still have the utmost respect for my African American teachers. They taught under deplorable conditions, used outdated textbooks, yet they taught me so much. They supplemented outdated materials with firsthand experiences, used current events as object lessons, urged me to always thirst after knowledge, and to diligently seek the truth. They taught me to respect all people, respect myself, be confident, and trust that education was the key to success and socio-economic improvement.

My parents also taught me those and so much more. They taught me things the textbooks were not designed to teach; how to navigate life in a racist society. I was constantly told to “stand up straight, don’t slouch, don’t say ain’t, open your mouth, speak up, make yourself heard!” While white parents were telling their children “You can be anything that you want to be,” my parents were telling me “You are somebody.” They knew Dick and Jane nor the pictures of white presidents hanging on my classroom wall were conveying that message. They knew the long-term effects of racism would devastate my sense of self-worth, sabotage my self-esteem, and annihilate my self-confidence. They countered racism with daily, positive reinforcements. They knew my having to stand at the Roses’ candy counter and wait until all white people were served before I was served, sent the message that I was “less than.” My parents were masters at soothing my wounded spirit, treating my invisible scars, and mending my broken heart. They were my balm in Gilead.

My parents unequivocally believed that a strong work ethic, respect for others, self-respect, and a good education were the keys to a better life. They made “a way out of know way” to send me to college. So, for every injustice, every slight, every hurt, or every hinderance the Separate But Equal Doctrine caused me, my parents, teachers, church, and community told me I was worthy. You will achieve! You will succeed! You are Somebody!