

A Retroactive Taste of the Bitterness of Inequality

I grew up in the Los Angeles area not long after the 1992 riots following the beating of Rodney King. In youth, I perceived my community as accepting. I played in public parks, frequented public museums, and attended public schools, all alongside children of every nationality. The ethnic makeup of my elementary school was diverse. I had classmates and friends of every color, from every corner of the globe. Growing up, I never felt that I was given preferential treatment because I was white, nor that my African-American, Indian, and Latino friends were treated any different because they were not. I was taught in school that Martin Luther King Jr. was a “very important man” and that minorities in the United States had overcome great adversity, but I failed to see any of that adversity as relevant to the period of time I am alive in. The existence of racial inequality in the United States did not resonate with me as a child because I had not been confronted with any tangible proof of the sadness it causes.

My perspective on race completely shifted when my mother confided in me that she had lost one of her closest childhood friends, Edmund Perry, at the age of seventeen, to police brutality - because he was black. The ugly truth of racial inequality had touched and profoundly left its mark on my mother, just ten years before I was born, and thus it touched me. I realized that structural racism was a much more real and palpable horror than I had previously understood. Edmund Perry’s end does not stand alone in the history books, but unfortunately among many like cases in which African-Americans have been grossly mistreated due to their pigmentation. Differential treatment exists in this country, though many Americans remain blind

to it, choosing to believe that we live within borders truly equal and free. Sadly, it is often not until an act of violence or shocking intolerance makes headlines that the public naiveté is shattered and pervasive inequality is illuminated and felt.

Structural racism is not an out-dated practice that faded away with the ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Though, as a society, we try to lessen the severity of it by imparting the opposite value system to younger generations, the sentiment is still around and the unjust effects of it are still being felt. While our children may have friends of all colors and teachers and parents may try their best to uphold the image of a utopian society in which racial inequality is completely nonexistent, as long as people are being treated differently due to the color of their skin or the native country of their ancestors, the issue of inequality still exists. However, before our attention is drawn to a horrific effect of this injustice, we are likely to perceive this country's social structure as fair and equal.

As, due to the intermingling of all sort of people in my own community, I was blissfully unaware that racial disparity still is pervasive in society, when drawing from her own life experiences Angela King, the aunt of Rodney Glen King, is astonished that her nephew was beaten on account of his race. In her interview with Anna Deavere Smith King recounts, "We weren't raised like this/ We weren't raised with no black and white thing./ We were raised with all kinds of friends: Mexicans, Indians, Blacks, Whites, Chinese./ You never would have know that something like this would happen to us./ And now it's such a shock." (Smith, 55). King expresses disbelief that structural racism is not simply a construct of the past, but currently existing, quietly, under her comfortable lifestyle in which she coexists peacefully with all kinds of people.

James Baldwin, unlike Angela King, felt throughout his life the sting of differential treatment and that African-Americans stood socially separate from whites. From his perspective, it was clear that he, as a black man, was treated unequally to caucasians. Yet, Baldwin notes that whites in this country ignore and overlook the racism that exists. In Sheldon Binn's article "The Fire Next Time," a commentary on James Baldwin's views on life as a black man in America, Binn quotes Baldwin's line, "The brutality with which negroes are treated in this country simply cannot be overstated, however unwilling white men may be to hear it."

My mother had never spoken about her good friend Eddie she met on a high-school-abroad program in Spain until I was a teenager. When she did, she told me that he was funny, that he was unafraid of what others thought, and that she admired him. She told me that after returning to the states she travelled by herself several times to Harlem to visit him and stay with his family. And, that one day, she got a call, followed by a news report on public television, highlighting his death. Edmund Perry had been out playing basketball with his brother and was shot in the abdomen by a cop who claimed Perry had attempted robbery. His brother, present at the incident, denied the validity of this story. My mother, who knew Eddie's character well and as a young adult herself comprehended the possibilities his future at Stanford and beyond held for him, refused to believe he was guilty. She was angry. It was hard for me to imagine the pain, the shock, the disbelief that she described feeling. She, too, had grown up in a liberal society she perceived as accepting, and the idea of a racially-charged mistake-killing of her friend by the NYPD was foreign and almost too terrible to believe. I had never felt so close to a story of that nature. A youth loaded with potential, months away from setting foot at a top university to which

he earned a full scholarship, and my mother's dear friend, was terminated too soon because of a likely misunderstanding rooted in racism and fear.

The interview of Jason Sanford in *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992* presents a white man's perspective on his multiple run-ins with the police and their relatively gentle treatment of him. Sanford was in some sort of legal bind and reflects on how he likely would have been beaten or arrested if he had been born with a different shade of skin. Sanford relates being told by a cop on one occasion, "You look like an all-American white boy. You look responsible" (Smith, 22), as if being white and being a responsible, law-abiding citizen have any correlation. As if Edmund Perry, an honors student with a ticket into Stanford University the coming fall, was any less "responsible" than a clean-cut white boy with "so many warrants." The dichotomic stories of Sanford and Perry show cops behaving situationally out of fear, exhibiting polarly different treatments of black and white potential criminals. In this way, African-American human beings become not individuals when confronted by the law, but numbers in a sea of potentially dangerous black faces. Though equality is preached and taught to our children in schools, at least in California schools like the ones I attended, society still denotes African-Americans as more dangerous than Whites. As Jason Sanford plainly puts it, "I'm sure I'm seen by the police totally different/ than a black man"(Smith, 23).

My perspective changed over time as I was exposed to the recent and distant atrocities having to do with racism in the United States. The police brutality incident involving Edmund Perry affected me because of its very personal relationship to my family, but as I aged, other like incidents have affected me by the sheer horror they invoke. Many people, such as Angela King, the "whites" Baldwin references, and a young version of myself are blind to the existence of

differential treatment in the united States because we are fooled into thinking it all vanished years ago. It is often not until a hate crime, act of police brutality, or other hurtful act of ignorance surfaces that we, as a country, realize the institution of structural racism still exists in this country, that there is a world of difference between the way blacks and whites are treated in the United States.

Works Cited

Smith, Anna Devere. *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992*. New York: Anchor, 1994. Print.

Binn, Sheldon. "The Fire Next Time." *The New York Times on The Web*. The New York Times Company, 31 Jan. 1963. Web. 21 Oct. 2014.