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Memory's Lessons

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Photos, newspaper clippings, old report cards, obituary notices— these holy mementos are stashed in the reliquary of my mother's chest of drawers. They bulge with decades of family history. My visits home often find me browsing through the photos. We talk about physical resemblances, resemblances in attitudes, likes and dislikes of family, and the similarity of events that have occurred over spans of time. As I listen to Mama telling stories, infusing the events and people in the photos with life, I marvel at the circularity of history.

Historical events are traditionally viewed through linear lenses. Events are recorded, stored in history books, shelved in libraries, displayed in museums— reference points for occasional reflection. However, listening to my mother making history flowing and fluid, I visualize the linkages from the past to the present and even to the future. I realize that, no matter how hard we attempt to sterilize our history, it is resilient, resisting our best efforts to sanitize and shelve select sections, storing them out of memory's view until it suits our needs.

In 1991, I viewed an exhibit of Preston Ewing Jr.'s photographs, "Let My People Go," a photonarrative of the struggle for civil rights in Cairo, Illinois. What goes around does indeed come around. Assaulted by the anger, frustration, fear, and pride contained in the photos, I found myself confronting the ties that still bind me to Cairo. During the period of Cairo's Civil Rights Movement, I was dealing with the emotional onslaughts of impending adulthood and striving to define myself as an African American woman, living not only in southern Illinois but in America. Even though my family resided in a little village a few miles north up the road, the Civil Rights Movement in Cairo played a critical role in our lives. My father attended Sumner High School. Both parents worked in Cairo for many years, my mother as a teacher, my father as one of the first African American Illinois state troopers. My sisters, brother, and I made friends with children living in and around Cairo.

During my childhood and early adolescence, my family traveled to Cairo at least once a month to shop. In the shops, I encountered many of the unwritten rules of racism. Saturday mornings found Commercial Street full of cars and activities as families, black and white, moved in and out of the stores—S. H. Kress, Woolworth's, J. J. Blum, Maxine's, Mode O' Day, Khoury Brothers, Michelson's, The Cairo News and Music Store, and Curtis and Mays Photo Studio. These are only a few of the stores I remember.

Some of the Cairo merchants greeted their black customers with quiet courtesy. More often than not, the money was plucked from our hands, the store owners sullenly accepting our presence. In these places, we were met at the threshold with overt rudeness and hostility. Some store owners and clerks blatantly questioned our ability to pay, making snide remarks. Many attempted to stop us from touching

anything. My mother would always severely caution us, "Keep your hands to yourself." "Look but don't touch!" Constrained by my mother's warnings and the contemptuous looks and manners of the store personnel, I often walked in these stores, arms locked tightly to my sides. I felt contaminated, unclean.

There were restaurants we simply knew not to go into. Only a few white-owned sit-down eateries welcomed black folk. In fact, I recall eating only at the local burger joints. Even there, we would pull up to the drive-in portion, order our food through the speakers, and eat in the car or take it home.

The boycott of Cairo's stores during the height of its civil rights struggle has frequently served as the focal point in discussions of Cairo's current state of social malaise. However, other critical moments preceding the boycott help to lay open the wounds of racial disparity. In 1967, Robert Hunt, a young African American soldier, was found hung in the Cairo jail. The furtive actions taken by the Cairo Police Department immediately following Hunt's death, coupled with evidence contradicting the explanation of his death as a "suicide," outraged the African American community. Voiceless, denied access to equal participation in the school system and city government, the community seethed with racial resentment. Hunt's death sparked several days of rioting in the city. But even before this, the event that kicked the machine of racial resentment into gear was the opening in 1963 and summary closing of the city swimming pool.

The swimming pool rested almost in the heart of Cairo. Riding in the family car, we would pass by it on our way to the shopping district. I was mesmerized by the pristine, blue water. The only access to water for swimming, prior to the building of the pool, was the creeks, streams, and rivers surrounding Cairo. Every year there were reports of children and adults drowning, usually in the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers bordering Cairo. Many were victims of their inability to swim. In my own rural neighborhood, the kids "swam" in weed-covered drainage ditches flooded by summer rains. The water, an opaque brown, contained twigs, trash, and, from time to time, snakes. Arms and legs flailed in imitation Olympic strokes.

The pool represented innumerable possibilities—the most obvious, much-needed swimming lessons. More importantly, it would have afforded blacks and whites, adults and children, some of the most important lessons of life: the true construction of friendship and citizenship.

White families chose instead to instill the self-righteous lessons of segregation in their children. Fearing the contamination of, and integration by, African Americans, the city closed the pool almost as soon as it had been opened and filled it in with concrete. As one African American citizen, Anne Winters, so eloquently put it, "You think back on these things and wonder, 'How can people be like that?'"

In my mind's eye, I can still see the closed pool: brownish-green algae floating on the water, choking the blue out, turning it a cloudy, sickly green. Kudzu-like vines crept along the walkway and walls, strangling the white concrete. Spidery dark cracks sliced through from one end to the other—a prophetic portent of Cairo's impending divisive battles.

The complex origins of Cairo's descent into progressive obscurity are legion. Perspectives differ, depending on which residents you speak with. Some assert even now, as they did then, that Cairo was a quiet, sleepy Southern city, her inhabitants coexisting in undisturbed harmony. Outside influences intruded, disrupting tranquil ground. These "outsiders" planted the insidious seeds of racial discontent and greed.

Others contend that watershed events are responsible for Cairo's current state of purgatory. The closing of the pool, Robert Hunt's questionable death in the Cairo jail, the rabid refusal of the city's merchants to open up employment opportunities—all forced the city into communal limbo.

Today, the shops on Commercial Street are no more than gutted buildings. Tattered signs whisper in the wind of a more prosperous time. There are concentrated efforts to attract industry into Cairo that would cut inroads into an extraordinarily high rate of unemployment. Some residents are fearful they may become victims of gunfire from the drug dealers and rival gangs that plague the city and surrounding region.

Plans for a new swimming pool have been discussed on several occasions by city administrators. The faces of African Americans working in government offices, banks, and throughout the city can be seen. There are now three African American members serving on the city council, and several more are police officers. And Cairo briefly boasted of an African American police chief, my father. Unfortunately, his hiring was in response to circumstances tragically paralleling the death of Robert Hunt. In 1991, an unarmed African American man, Roy Lee Jones, was shot at numerous times and eventually killed by a white Cairo police officer, once again resurrecting the specter of racism.

Today, twenty-five years later, my struggle for self-definition and respect, along with that of other African Americans, continues—not just in Cairo but throughout the nation. Even though the civil injustices that birthed the Civil Rights Movement have been visually documented and archived, bearing witness to human illiberality and treachery, we still grapple daily with the issue of civil rights. History's ghosts haunt us, following us wherever we go.

Recently, the current mayor of Cairo asserted that the "good and rational" white people of Cairo, those holding the balance of power, fear, and ignorance, sought only to protect Cairo's best interests during this time of civil disturbance. To become entrenched in fear, refusing to face the constructive power of change is not rational. It is simply suicidal.

The racial turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s was not unique to Cairo. Across the country, innumerable cities engaged in a racial tug-of-war. "Good and rational" people weighed the ultimate mortal consequences of their segregationist attitudes and chose to share the balance of power. As a result, some attitudes and beliefs were reshaped. Some cities became reborn and have flourished and prospered. The dogged persistence and selfishness of Cairo's "good and rational" people have sentenced the city to economic and social oblivion—living testimony to the arrogance of exclusion.

Unfortunately, memory's lessons have dimmed in the relatively short time we've learned discrimination and exclusion lead straight to disaster and tragedy. Many of us have become fugitives of the past, attempting to escape the blood of our history. As a result, there are those who ask that history, as it has been, be placed out of sight, effectively putting it out of our minds. Such is the case with the Civil Rights Movement. The movement has become known as an event that happened "back then." In essence, *movement,* defined as motion towards something, or progress, has been negated and set aside.

Some ask that history, as it is now being made, be viewed as faulty. Our eyes are not to be trusted. What we see is not necessarily to be believed. The unjustifiable beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles police and the subsiding public outcry bear witness to this and to how quickly our memory fades.

And there are those who demand that future history be stripped naked and rendered colorless. The contributions of African Americans and other people of color are to be disregarded. Such is the case with those who assert the (re)writing of our collective histories is false and politically incorrect.

Hopefully, as we finger these photographs, turn the pages, recalling the power and emotion of the moment, we will not merely consign these fragments of our past to the reliquary of our memories. Abraham Lincoln prophetically remarked, "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history." We must acknowledge that we are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past until we learn from them. Memory's lessons of Cairo should remind us all that the Civil Rights Movement is not over.