

Excerpts

Triumph! A Battle Plan For Joy

Gladys Simmons Carson

Excerpts 1 – New Era; New Battles

In the hostility of segregated existence, African American parents protected their children from much of racism's viciousness. They forewent their own comfort, and yes, their pride, to spare the children. They suffered indignities, withstood inhumanities, suppressed anger, masked resentment, and silently bore the pains of belittlement. Yet they held their heads high, and defeated the shame, finding solace in their hope for future generations.

As dictated by Jim Crow, we lived in our own communities, attended our own churches and schools, and enjoyed our own concerts and dances. On Saturdays, we went to see our own movies at the Harlem Theater. A few times we climbed some outside stairs to sit in the balcony at the Majestic Theater, precluding any contact with White moviegoers. They showed better films there. But the awkwardness of the experience underscored our relegation to second-class citizenship. So we preferred substandard movies at the Harlem Theater over substandard treatment at the Majestic.

Ironically, segregated living helped give birth to oneness in our community. Segregation gave us commonality, and spurred us to make something good from intended evil. Thus, conditions designed to frustrate us to defeat, often motivated us to measured victories, helping to transform our community into that elusive proverbial village. We became a neighborhood of family.

While still a teenager, ambition enticed me to venture beyond the bounds of community to explore summer job opportunities beyond the invisible walls. I surrendered to the enticement. Equipped with the best preparation available, I stepped from behind my family's protective shield, out of the village, and into the White man's world.

I entered that world confident I had everything I needed to succeed: the forewarnings of family and friends, above-average intelligence, deep-rooted motivation, theoretical awareness of real-world inequities, and a philosophy for coping with face-to-face racism. Yet, despite my strong will and careful preparation, I still lacked the wherewithal to circumvent a simple reality—the incompatibility of hard-core bigotry and my genetic makeup.

I did not know to pretend ignorance and hold my head down in a posture of insecurity. Therefore, my uppity insolence offended the White interviewers. That quickly took me out of the running for the summer "Colored" jobs advertised in the Dallas Times Herald. So I returned to the village empty-handed.

After reality surpassed my imagination of Jim Crow's ruthlessness, I settled for a safer summer job, washing dishes in a small café where a relative worked as a cook. I say safer, because I could call no place safe, not for an African American's emotional health and dignity. But some places wielded injustice with less harshness.

I took pride in washing each dish until it squeaked. Oh, but I found no pride in the way they treated us. The manager told my relative she did not want any trouble out of me, and to be

sure that I understood my “place.” “Some of the young Coloreds of today seem to forget their place.”

I had already choked a few times on the indoctrination of “place,” and had begun learning to wear a mask to disguise my disgust so I could earn a little money. I cannot convey the depth of my anger and frustration, trying to maintain dignity while being openly and legally demeaned.

The White waitresses, busboys and cashier entered through the front door of the café. My relative and I walked through a narrow passageway alongside the building to enter the back door. We had to remain well-hidden from the patron’s view. We could enter the dining area only before opening and after closing. That is when we would thoroughly clean the tables and chairs, dust the windowsills, refill the salt, pepper, and sugar vessels, tidy up the condiment stand, and sweep and mop the floor.

The dining area held no special allure for me. Square tables, with red and white checked plastic table clothes, and straight-back chairs, made up the furnishings; plus an old jukebox sat in the corner, partially blocking a window. So I had no burning need to enter the area. I just resented having no choice.

I admit I would rather have entered through the front door, instead of through that narrow passageway that led to the back door, especially when it rained and made the walkway muddy. However, I entertained no delusion of that happening, not with back-door entrance being one of Jim Crow’s main symbols of servitude.

The ten dollars I earned from my dishwashing job each week increased my pride. Based on the rules of our house, I knew it did not belong to me alone. A portion would go toward the household budget. Also, I would give a portion to my cousin who did my chores while I worked. I felt grown-up and proud contributing to the budget each week, though ever so small the amount. The family did not need my few dollars, but I needed to learn responsibility.

I worked at the café throughout the summer, but did not become resigned to southern indignities. Rather, the exposure made me hunger all the more for justice. I neither expected nor wanted special treatment, only those liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. As the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s became more intense, Jim Crow became more indigestible. In 1955, the United States Supreme Court ruled racially segregated, “separate but equal” schools unconstitutional. That made me believe all-the-more that, one day, even I would find freedom in “the land of the free.”

CONTACT: Gladys Carson

Email: Carson@GladysCarson.com

Media/Press Kit: www.GladysCarson.com/press