

The Stories We Tell

In 1986, when I was in tenth grade in Milford, New Hampshire I read *To Kill A Mockingbird* and loved it. For many years I would say that it was my favorite book. I wanted to name my dog Atticus. Gregory Peck reminded me of my dad. I would often quote the line after the verdict is read, "They've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it – seems that only children weep."

So two years ago when my daughter Maya started to read *To Kill A Mockingbird* in 9th grade I told her how much I loved it. Now to say my daughter doesn't like to read is an understatement, but I was excited for her to read the book that had so impacted me at her age. After finishing the novel Maya commented, "Yeah, I can see why white people love that book so much."

It is reasonable to say that something at play here is a teenager's desire to annoy her mother. But in one comment, Maya, a young woman of color, summed up so much about my experience as a white person. I want to see myself as Atticus. I want to think that I would be on the side of justice! I would not allow the Ewell's to unfairly charge Tom Robinson! Many well meaning white people are so quick to say (and mean it) that we are willing to fight the institutionalized racism we see around us, without perhaps thinking about how these systems benefited us personally. I was recently reminded how my own family is an example of this.

Not long ago I went to Legal Seafood with my sister, my brother-in-law and my father. As my sister and I both had children of college age, we were talking about the high cost of tuition. The conversation turned to affirmative action. My brother-in-law was commenting on the admittance policies of some universities that seemed to favor students of color. Clearly, my brother-in-law was questioning the fairness of such policies.

My eighty year old father, who was the Chief of Labor Relations in the FAA and later investigated cases of discrimination within government agencies, responded, "I think that is probably a fair observation. But I wonder what benefits we received because we are white that put our children in the position they are in now."

As I sat in the leather booth at Legal Seafood, I reflected on the fact that my father's whiteness opened up a pathway to the acquisition of wealth that I had never fully noted. The

story of how my family “worked its way up” that I have always told with pride became more complicated.

My grandfather was a bus driver. He and my grandmother raised three sons in a triple decker apartment in Englewood, New Jersey. In 1953 the Korean War was underway, and my father and his brothers enlisted in the military. Fortunately for my dad, the war ended while he was still training in Hawaii. Nonetheless, he and his brothers qualified for the GI Bill. The GI Bill, or the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, provided veterans with college tuition, low cost mortgages and loans for businesses. This benefit dramatically changed the standard of living for a generation of veterans and their families, including mine.

However, the GI Bill gave money to many banks that in turn would not give African Americans the mortgages and business loans that were secured by white veterans. Ira Katznelson, professor of political science at Columbia University, “argues that ‘the law was deliberately designed to accommodate Jim Crow.’ He cites one 1940's study that concluded it was as though the G.I. Bill had been earmarked 'For White Veterans Only'” (Kotz, New York Times). Bill Clinton once said that the GI Bill was proof that “If you give the American people, ordinary Americans, a chance to help themselves, they will do extraordinary things” (University of California). I believe this is true, but what is also true is that my father’s family was aided in ways that families of color who were every bit as willing to “help themselves and do extraordinary things” were denied.

Recently, I've been reconsidering what these stories mean, both my family's economic rise and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. For a long time I used my family as the classic example of the American Dream: my grandfather worked to find his way into the middle class, and in only two generations all of his grandchildren graduated from college. This is true and something to proud of. And Atticus is noble and someone to be admired. It is also true that whiteness and the privilege it brings play a huge role in both stories, and that needs to be discussed as well.

In some ways the Brookline schools reminds me of Atticus, or an attempt to be Atticus. White educators want to do the noble thing. The school system keeps making one program after another to address issues of access and equity. These are thoughtful initiatives led by smart and committed people. But I worry that are doing it with an underlying ethos of “helping the poor

brown and black kids” and not in order to create a more just and democratic society. What would it mean to all members of our community if inequalities were named, and people were willing to make substantive structural changes to the institutions that continue to benefit white members of our society more than non-white?

In her New York Times essay on *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Roxane Gay writes, “As for the story, I can take it or leave it. Perhaps I am ambivalent because I am Black. I am not the target audience. I don’t need to read about a young white girl understanding the perniciousness of racism to actually understand the perniciousness of racism. I have ample firsthand experience.” I shared this quote with my daughter Maya. “Exactly,” she said. “I mean, they don’t need to use a Southern twelve-year-old from the 1930’s to teach me about racism.” Scout’s story is not Roxane Gay’s story, and it is not Maya’s either.

For the record, this isn’t an essay arguing against teaching *To Kill A Mockingbird*. I still think the line: “They’ll do it again and when they do it – seems that only children weep” is beautiful and relevant. Instead this is an invitation for well intentioned white educators to revisit the stories we hold dear. It might be worth questioning if we are drawn to stories that label *the good guys and the bad guys* and offer a more simplistic construct of race as opposed to those that offer a harsher truth: that all white people in the United States have benefitted from institutions that have been set up to benefit us from the start. And so I think white educators have to look honestly at our stories: the stories we hold in our families, the stories we use to frame the national identity, and most importantly, the stories we teach our students. What narrative, whose narrative, do they tell? What assumptions do they allow us to keep? And what don’t they demand that we change?

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