

Alliance Theological Seminary

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Personal Racial Autobiography

by

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### **Introduction**

Jemar Tisby in his Book *How to fight Racism*, introduced what he calls the “ARC” of Racial Justice. “ARC” is an acronym for Awareness, Commitment and Relationships. He makes a noticeably big deal about Awareness, and rightfully so since one cannot become Committed to fighting racism by establishing strategic and otherwise Relationships before one knows where she or he, stands. Yet, while Awareness is chiefly important, for this writer I must start at a place where I remember all too well, it was a time before I was even aware of race. Tisby wrote, “In General, one begins with less awareness of racial dynamics and an unconscious acceptance of White people and their cultural practices as normative, acceptable and even preferred” (Tisby 2021). He is right, let me explain.

### **Holding Dorothy O’Hara’s hand**

The school year was 1966 - 1967 and I was in the first grade. I attended P. S. 135 in Queens Village, N.Y. In those days, our schools by this time were very much integrated. And I remember there being Whites, Black people, those of Indian descent, Latin and Hispanic too. Mrs. Albert was a tall, white, smartly dressed woman who I recall was very nice. On occasion and this was probably in the Spring of 1967 she would take the class on walks. I remember there being a school aid that would monitor the rear of the class while Mrs. Albert led from the front. In those days there was probably about 25-30 children per classroom, and in order to keep control of the number of kids we would line up in size orders with the girls on one side and the boys on the other. It was not uncommon that diverse cultures would walk side to side. I was short as a child and therefore was usually toward the front of the line and next to me was Dorothy O’Hara. I’m not sure how but somehow Dorothy and I would hold hands as we walked together and I liked it, and I think she did too. Dorothy was a chubby white little girl with brown hair, and I loved holding hands and walking with her. In retrospect there was nothing weird about it. To

me, I had a little girlfriend, whatever that meant, and her name was Dorothy O'Hara. But my innocence and ignorance would give way to awareness sometime after April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968.

### **What my Mother Said, that Right There.**

On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968, my little world changed, at least a little. By the time the news that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. "At 6:05 P.M. on Thursday, 4 April 1968, Martin Luther King was shot dead while standing on a balcony outside his second-floor room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee" (University 2007). For me, an eight-year-old little boy in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade it was not a big deal at first. Being so young I didn't understand the gravity of the situation until I saw my mother crying and out of her pain and anguish, she blurted "there's enough Black people out here that could mop up all these Whites", that right there!

Oh, Blacks and Whites, so White people killed Dr. King? As time went on, I began to see pictures of Dr. King on the living room walls of the Black families I knew. At Church, some of our songs began to change. Songs like, "We shall overcome", and "We've come this far by faith", and so on began to reverberate not just in my little church but also the churches of my friends, especially the Baptist Churches. And then about 3 weeks before the school term ended, on June 5<sup>th</sup> just after midnight, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. I didn't know this at the time, but Kennedy was a Democratic Senator from New York and had aspirations towards the presidency of the United States, and more to the matter at hand was a friend, supporter and sympathized with the struggle of Blacks here in the U.S.

These events had a profound effect on me as I realized there was a difference between me and say, Dorothy O'Hara, although not as much as one might think. For example, some of my Black friends were becoming socially and racially aware and as a result looked at Whites with animosity, they were all about the struggle. I on the other hand did not. I *liked* white girls. Their

hair was soft and long, their skin was bright and light, while mine was very dark and my hair was nappy. I didn't know it then, but I was experiencing a form of reverse discrimination from my own Black brothers and sisters who would call me "blacky", spook", or "ugly". One guy I remember got so angry with me "the dark side of the earth...". So, there is that. But perhaps it was also something my mother told me once when I asked if I could join the neighborhood boxing club. There on Hollis Ave. in Hollis, Queens was a boxing gym. It was painted in the Black Liberation Colors, red, black, and green. My mother gave me an emphatic, NO! She said, "if I let you join this gym, they'll have you cut off some White man's head!" Well, I didn't think I would do that, but it at least said to me what my mother thought about all this "Black Power" stuff. She never said this, but I'm quite sure she wasn't into the Black Panther Party either. I think I took my lead from her and didn't really get into the "Black thing".

I remember once my good friend Malcolm Encarnacion was upset about not being taught about African American History, we were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I remember the White teacher was at a loss for words, and I pitied *her*. If I could find Malcom today, I would tell him that he was right and apologize for not seeing it his way. I should mention that while I was not a militant, I did learn to use the Black – White racial divide to my advantage. When I was in the third grade, and while playing around with Michael Geiger, a White kid I fell and cracked my tooth. Thinking I would get into trouble when I got home, I told my mother that a White guy made it happen.

I think these and other factors caused some self-hatred in me, and I opted for White girls and friends at school. After my First-grade crush with Dorothy O'Hara, there were two other White girls that I had crushes on, Stacy Peterson and Donna Wiltshire. And it wasn't like I didn't have Black friends or girlfriends, on the contrary. It was just that I was comfortable in both camps (which serves me to this day, in business and ministry), and it was cool for me, being the

only Black kid on my High School baseball teams. This had its advantages and disadvantages. My Black friends would call me an “Oreo”, black on the outside and white on the inside. My White friends didn’t seem to call me names, thus I trusted them. I think because of this, it took me a very long time to see the systemic effects of racism. For example, for years I worked for much less than my White counterparts, in the electrical industry. When I found out what some of them were earning and I knew they couldn’t then or now shine my shoes, I realized I had not only sold myself short (didn’t think I was worth more), but also those doing the hiring knew they were getting a bargain and exploited me.

### **I’m Black and I’m Proud**

It’s taken some time to really understand this race thing, and the systemic realities that have been there all the time, but somehow eluded me. After all, I had a great job, was making good money, and had two cars. I bought my first home much earlier than many of my friends. I reasoned if you’re not successful maybe it’s your fault, perhaps you’re not articulate, or intelligent. Looking back, I did not have a clue. Ironically, it was the Church that revealed the ugliness and the reality behind the curtain. Now, it seems I’m making up for lost time, learning what I can, trying to wisely share what I’m learning. And over the years I’m learning how important timing and patience is in this endeavor. By the time I got to Liberty University (Cir. 2005) to complete my undergraduate degree, my eyes began to open. I saw how a conservative view of the scriptures often completely ignore people of color in the text (and otherwise) and the systematic problems that exist. So, I completed my degree and gave them what they wanted and graduated Cum Laude. But I realized that, that education (at Liberty), while good, was incomplete. And for that reason, I decided I would not do my master’s there and came instead to ATS. What an excellent choice!

### **Conclusion**

Looking back at my mother's refusal to let me join the boxing gym, instead she sent me to church and stressed the importance of at least a high school education; she had only a sixth-grade education. As a result, I'm the first person in my family to have a college degree. But it also taught me to not fear or hate Whites. Over the years I have pastored predominantly White and Asian churches and lead departments at work that included multi-racial groups. So, mom probably wasn't wrong for saying no, perhaps, the Spirit of God was leading her. Since 2007 I have been very racially conscious, and I have the right-wing conservative Christians to thank. I expected racism among the unbeliever, they operate by fear and ignorance, right? However, it was an eye-opener to see racism exposed right in my face when I served a 95 percent Anglo-Saxon church. And when I brought it up I was told the ground is level at the foot of the cross, hmmm.

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