

A Service About the South

UUFES Speakers: Peaco Todd, Marsha Carlin/Jim Torpey, Missy Myers

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*A Story About Racism and Redemption*

By Peaco Todd

I grew up in Richmond, VA, a city central to both the Revolutionary and the Civil War, or as we called it, the War of Northern Aggression. My mother was a FFV – First Families of Virginia – her forebears had been in Jamestown. Despite my mother's pedigree, in her case the gentility was somewhat impoverished – our economic status was lower middle class and we lived in a modest but, of course, all-white neighborhood. Segregation in the 50s and 60s in Richmond was absolute.

We pick up the mores of our cultural environment -- to grow up in Virginia was to be imbued with the notion of The Glorious Lost Cause and to defend The War – there was only one – as a struggle to preserve states' rights. Of course, in reality that meant the rights of states to permit slavery. I accepted it all at face value – I was proud to be a Virginian.

Apart from a black woman I dimly remembered helping my mother before I started school, and another black woman named Hattie -- my mother's sister-in-law's housekeeper -- I didn't know any black people at all. Racism wasn't something that we ever talked about at home. I did pick up some vague hints about my parents' attitudes, the primary one being my mother's overt distaste for her aunt Edna, an unrepentant and truly nasty racist. My mother objected to Edna's vicious comments—I didn't like Edna because she smelled bad. I got the distinct impression that Edna promised to leave my mother a sizeable inheritance if she would accept her racist views. My mother declined, a great sacrifice since the money would have made a huge difference in her life – her disliked brother had married an heiress and my mother constantly railed against their difference in economic status.

My mother was a complicated woman: highly intelligent, gracious as only a Southern lady can be, and throughout my childhood in the process of descending into severe mental illness. My arrival was quite a surprise – both my parents were over 40 when I was born. As a result of that and her own questionable upbringing – her mother by all accounts was a mean and unhappy woman who encouraged my sensitive and highly-strung mother to be timid and fearful – she became very overprotective of me. As an only child with a mentally ill parent and a father who traveled a lot for business, I was both shielded from certain realities and forced into responsibilities I was much too young for – a perfect recipe for resentment. And I resented the hell out of her.

When I was in the seventh grade, I heard a rumor that my junior high school was going to be integrated. It didn't happen but my friends all reacted, some strongly, to the possibility. I didn't think much about it, but one day when I got home from school, I repeated, quite thoughtlessly, what I'd heard some kids say: "I'm never gonna go to school with no... n-word." My mother's face took on an expression that I had never seen before. She looked at me like I was something she'd just scraped off the bottom of her shoe, and after a moment of loaded silence she replied, in

soft and measured tones, “If you ever say that again, you don’t live here anymore.” Then she turned her back on me and walked out of the room.

That moment has resonated throughout my life. I realized, in an instance of blinding clarity, just how ugly and offensive racism is. While it was a turning point in my own ethical development, it was only a brief respite in my relationship with my mother as her illness deepened. However, I believe that moment brought redemption to us both – I had to face and fix an unacceptable part of myself, and that vision, of a side of my mother I had only hazily intimated, helped me put her own difficult and often messy struggles into perspective.

Recently, we did a major renovation of our house and as part of the process went through some boxes that had been in the barn for probably thirty years. In one, to my horror, I found a Confederate flag. No doubt I acquired it when I still harbored romantic notions of the Glorious South, but now my reaction was to holler to my husband: “Get rid of it! Burn it!”

Sadly racism is alive and well, not just in the south but throughout the country. But it can be exposed as the pernicious thing it is – and sometimes even silly, racist little girls can be transformed by the power of an imperfect mother’s perfect love.

*What We Learned About the South*  
By Jim Torpey and Marsha Carlin

Jim:

While standing at a urinal at the Rolling River Bistro, I was asked how two Northerners wound up in Natchez, Mississippi on a cold January night. I answered with a sudden burst of honesty. “I’m trying to confront one of my life-long prejudices – the voice in my head that hears a Southern accent and immediately assumes that the speaker is uneducated and probably a little slow.” The southerner chuckled and admitted that, when he hears a Yankee speak, he assumes the person will be brash, rude and in a big hurry for no reason.

Marsha:

Confronting some of our prejudices was a major theme of our forty-day road trip through the Deep South this past winter. We set out with the expectation that we would try to understand the misguided beliefs of the people labeled, “the deplorables.” Instead, we ended the trip with the realization that WE were the ones carrying numerous uninformed, mistaken and prejudiced opinions of the South, its people and culture.

Jim:

Prejudice #1- Southerners are not so bright:

Reality - We met scores of open, fun-loving, intelligent, talented people.

- We spent an evening with Phil Easterbrook in Huntsville, Alabama. Phil is not only a talented banjo player in the bluegrass band, Fireball Mail, but is a NASA rocket scientist in his day job.

- We shared a meal with creative machinist Jim Bowman who has spent his life inventing new

ways to make things easier for restaurant workers.

- In the local American Legion bar in Savannah, I talked about PTSD with a West Point-educated Iraq veteran, now attending law school. His grasp of the psychological subtleties of re-entry to civilian society struck another blow to our “Southerners' intelligence” prejudice.

Marsha:

Prejudice #2 - Organized religion is the opiate of the people:

Reality - We both, one of us raised Catholic, the other Jewish, have led our adult lives far from organized religion, so we were continually taken aback by the seamless integration of religion and life in the South

- At Nashville's Station Inn we struck up a conversation with the Petersens, a bluegrass band of four siblings (ages 16 to 26): sweet, devout, talented and smart. They attributed their success to God opening doors for them, a formula we rarely hear at home.

Jim:

- At the Pike Piddler's Storytelling Festival in Brundidge, Alabama, the program started with classic gospel music (we eventually overcame our prejudices to the constant mention of God, salvation and Satan). When the bandleader announced “God Bless America,” the audience spontaneously rose to their feet and began to sing a song that represented to them a deep love of country and kinship with a community of like-minded souls; something they were born into and lived every day. Although we initially hesitated to join in based in part on the song's political implications, we quickly looked at each other, rose to our feet and dropped our reserve; belting out the familiar words with a group of strangers in small-town, southern Alabama.

- At the Sunday service in the all black Little Zion Baptist Church in the Mississippi Delta town of Money we were overwhelmed by the welcome offered by the congregation. Although the deacon reported an increase in the use of the “N” word in the last two years, he remained upbeat and confident that God will triumph over evil.

Marsha:

Prejudice #3 - Rural Southerners are not ambitious- they should move to where the jobs are- like we did!

Reality - We came to understand and respect that Southerners have a deep love of place, family and history that roots them.

In rural areas a feeling of being left behind hangs in the air. At the same time that economic dislocation and factory closings are causing stress, we witnessed the resilience of self-reliant people, proud of family with a keen desire to settle near their ancestral homes. Place and land are important to them. We met people in the rural South who make a living by cobbling together ways to survive: working in small factories; repairing things; farming, taking care of their own. We started to understand why moving away from their homeland was not a desirable option.

Jim:

Prejudice #4 - Gun control is a prerequisite for a civilized society.

Reality - We learned that in the minds of many Southerners, the right to own guns is a proxy for respect for Southern culture and tradition. The duck hunters we ate with at the Blue and White Café in Tunica, Mississippi were good ole boys, engineers, and college professors out for a day with their friends and their dogs, hunting a tradition they grew up with. For them and others, “gun control” is code for liberals’ disrespecting their lives and culture.

Marsha: What It All Meant To Us

In processing our trip to the Deep South, we have been forced to confront our a prejudices and have come to see that our political differences should not deter us from finding the common elements of love of family, home, place and culture that bind us as Americans and more broadly as members of the world community. We are minimizing our differences, but we came home surprisingly optimistic that we might all somehow pull through this difficult period in our history by respecting and celebrating both our differences and our common humanity.

In closing, our trip reaffirmed the sentiment of Mark Twain that inspired our travels when he said:

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”

*Reflections on the American South*

By Missy Myers

I wanted to bring you all sweet tea, the way they drink it back home – ice cold and so sweet it sets your teeth on edge. My grandma would have brought it in the big wide-mouthed glass jars in which she and my grandpa got government food to stretch what they grew themselves, jars that she saved by the shelf-full in the cellar, along with just about everything else they ever got, because store-bought goods were an expensive luxury and you never knew when you might need that empty jar or nail or scrap of cloth or fruit jar of green beans that you canned in 1957. Sweet tea is made with a ridiculous amount of cane sugar, which gets a bad rap for a lot of reasons but which was the homemade sweetener in the rural South – my great-grandmother would send her sons to cut and chop cane and would then boil and crush it and cook down the resulting syrup to use as their sugar. Sound familiar? Oh, and one last thing – I would have made my sweet tea with water from one of the clear, spring-fed rivers in the southern Missouri Ozarks where my people have lived for generations, both sides, mom and dad. I wouldn’t have told you until after you drank it and that, right there, is the experience of growing up in the South.

You can't live without water, right? You drink deeply and, at least as a child, unknowingly, of what is given you by the people who raise you, by your community and culture, take it all in and it becomes a part of you. The water that flows in those rivers passed through the soil that absorbed the sweat and piss and blood of your people, passed through the bones of your ancestors, dissolved a little of the limestone under your feet, and welled up in the deep blue of the springs, to spill into the river and pick up yet more history, good and bad dissolved alike in the essential stuff of life.

So what can I tell you about the South, in 5 minutes, without over-generalizing or stereotyping, that might help you to better understand its people and culture? Here are a few things that stand out for me. As I said earlier, my people are from the Missouri Ozarks, and that's the way folks talk about family there. There is a strong sense of family identity and solidarity, rooted to place and family history. Though almost none of us live there anymore, my family and I make regular pilgrimages to the old farms, swimming holes, graveyards, and lost "home places" where our forbears lived. We sit and share a picnic or a cold drink, tell old stories, pick up rocks to carry home in pockets and purses. Those family stories extend into a deep sense of shared local and regional history and tradition. I think of my great grandfather wrangling mules for the Union Army at the Battle of Pilot Knob and my grandfather cutting timber and brush to clear paths for the railroads still evident in the region. I had relatives who were moonshiners and some that were revenuers.

Of course, that kind of strong shared identity and history means that you belong or you do not, and gives rise to the racism, homophobia, and xenophobia that are still part of Southern life, especially in poor rural areas that make up much of the South. I have a vivid memory of the growing panic I felt at the prospect of getting a motel room for Margaret and I one night many years ago on one of our first trips to southern Missouri. As I had expected, the owner didn't want to rent us a single room, and a superficially casual but culturally complicated conversation ensued in which we both carefully avoided any direct confrontation or insinuation and I finally successfully played the best card I had by referring to my grandparents' nearby hometown by its old name, Lutesville, which had been changed several years before.

Sounds silly, but that "qualified" me as belonging and overrode the broader prejudice – that, and my having abided by the major social compact of the South, which is that interactions should be conducted with manners and respect, whether or not one feels that it is deserved. It's hot down there, people can get testy and you don't want to rile the whole tribe, and a lot of folks have guns and such, but more basically, it's just expected, and offered. Finally, things move a lot slower in much of the South – chalk it up to the heat, the value placed on courtesy and respect, and the importance of family and community connection above all else. Folks are much more in the moment, especially when it comes to other people. I've spent what felt like an eternity in checkout lines in small local grocery stores, watching my ice cream melt while the patron ahead of me shared a long story with the cashier. It's okay – breathe...

I haven't talked about some of the huge challenges facing the South, and indeed, all of us. Racism and sexism, the overwhelming economic and healthcare needs of poor rural communities, disparities in wealth and resources, environmental issues, and the enormous

cultural struggle to broaden an identity so long defined by slavery and a war that ended over 150 years ago and that proved that a people and a society cannot effectively and enduringly be changed by brute force. In the Southern way, growth and change will only happen over time, through connection, relationship, and gradually broadening understanding. Rivers hold their history, true, but also slowly, relentlessly, inexorably, carry some of it away, expose new substrate, and cut new channels – so it is everywhere, and so it is in the South.