Race and Racial Understanding-Past and Present
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Emmet Till was fourteen when he was brutally murdered in August 1955. That same month I celebrated my sixteenth birthday. His death would be my first immersion into the psychology of lynching. I knew the history of lynching and numbers and the supposed reasons for that brutal act, but Till’s death meant something personal to my friends and me. Heretofore, the act had only involved adults. Now suddenly my friends and I felt an uneasy vulnerability, for a teen, like us, had been targeted. Even so, in the back of our minds, based on history, we knew we were safer in Charleston, South Carolina than we might be in Alabama, Georgia, or Mississippi. Still, we took no chances. As we walked on the two main business streets, King and Meeting streets, we were more alert to cars driving by, especially if they were full of white men.”

Till’s death would initiate the formal immersion of my friends and me into the ritual of “The Talk,” the process whereby black teen boys are instructed into the intricacies of the prevailing racial etiquette, the do’s and don’ts of confronting and dealing with whites. This was often an uncomfortable moment for all. Generally, our mothers, grandmothers, or aunts initiated the process. Fathers and grandfathers were often not good in making the case. They might say, “now, be careful when dealing with white folks,” or “ take care of yourself, be smart.” The women in our families were much more direct. They sat us down and gave us, what we then called “the evil eye.” One of my aunts later called it the “eye of wisdom.” The ritual was often uncomfortable because very few of our relatives seriously and formally talked about race. All of my friends parents and relatives worked for whites. My godparents were less dependent on whites, as they were entrepreneurs and sold ice, wood, and coals, but they all thought about race, and race relations. Blacks and whites co-existed geographically in a deeply divided community. Du Bois used the term “double consciousness” to describe this emotional and psychological divide. I’ve used the term “dual marginality,” to explain this deep geographical, sociological and psychological community division between blacks and whites.

When Burke High School reconvened a moth after till’s death, our teachers spoke about his death. In our Homeroom class, Joe Moore spoke about the event, I could then sense the anger he sought to suppress while relaying the incident. Other teachers spoke about the event while admonishing us to keep moving forward, avoid being consumed by hatred, and remain positive for things will get better. This message was a continuation of all the messages from my elementary school teacher: think positively, deepen our educational aspirations, and strive to be the best we can be, both in our personal lives and professionally. We never, never thought we could not move ahead with our lives because whites would not permit us to. We were told in school and at home that we were smart enough to find ways of outmaneuvering whites. Old Uncle Pete would come by the house and relay stories, often hilarious, of this outmaneuvering.

In our churches the prevailing message was to love those who hate, or mistreat you, but the co-message was always to stay focus, remain positive, and work to improve the self and the community. Despite this racial oppression and suppression, we never viewed ourselves as inferior to whites. My teen friends, both males and females, were intricately wrapped into our community, so that unless we shopped downtown, we could avoid the larger white community, those on each corner on the East Side the corner store groceries were owned by Jews, Greeks, and a few Southern whites.