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The Elephant on the Road to Racial Reconciliation

By Deborah V. Vermaat

In February of 2007, I found myself having dinner with a friend and talking about a book on racial cleansings in America, *Buried in the Bitter Waters* by Elliot Jaspin, in which our two separate lives are merged in the last chapter. His great-grandfather had been the victim of a lynching, while my great-aunt's death after a brutal attack and rape fueled a lynching. My friend is African-American, and I am white. Our history together started in 2000, yet it had taken us seven years to sit down face to face and to talk about our respective family histories in depth.

Sometime during our conversation, he asked me what I could do to address my feelings of being alone. I had not been aware until that moment that what I had been feeling was loneliness. I had a full life, with a demanding schedule, four children, two grandsons, parents with health concerns, and a husband. Most of the time I felt as if I were in the center ring of the circus of life.

So how could loneliness be possible in such a full life? In front of me was a black man, the only person I had known in my fifty plus years of life, to whom I could talk about my family's past and the changes I've gone through in the last twenty years as I've come to terms with that history. How ironic was it that the person I found to release me from my past was a black man whose great-grandfather had been lynched? The two of us had become friends over something most people might think would drive us apart.

It dawned on me that evening, as I looked at him across the table, that over the entire span of my lifetime I had not felt comfortable talking to anyone else the way I do with him. I trust this man to keep my confidences, to tell me the truth, and to ask me the hard questions. In a true eureka moment, I realized I must have been lonely to feel as if I could not talk to even my best white

friends and truly have them understand what I have gone through. Suddenly, I felt as if the circus spotlight illuminated my loneliness and my race no longer trumped my feelings.

I will always be grateful for the depth to which I have been able to talk to my friend, about not only my family's history, but also about the changes that have taken place in my heart, mind, and soul about what it means for me to be white. For many whites who read this, you may have never asked yourself, "What does it mean for me to be white?" I had never asked that question before attending a workshop in 2000 called "Honest Conversation about Race." I attended the workshop to strengthen my work as a member of the Camden County Human Relations Commission in southern New Jersey. I found myself at this diversity workshop, thinking I was going to learn about how people of other races, ethnicities, and cultures differed from me. The focus on the day was not on the people of color, but on the experiences of what it is like to be white and a person of privilege in this country. What brought me to that day in 2000 was years of silence and yearning paired with guilt and shame over an event in my family's past.

As I grew up in Forsyth County, Georgia during the 1950's and 60's, I knew very little about my family's history. I am not sure when I first heard Mae's name, but by the time I was approaching adolescence, I knew she had been my grandmother's sister and that she had been killed by blacks when she was a teenager. The event was never talked about in our family except in whispered voices. I grew up knowing it was a subject that was taboo.

One summer when I was about twelve, I was traveling with my grandparents, Granny and Papa, in their pickup truck. I do not think Granny began the day with the intention of taking me to the place where her sister was raped and left to die. She helped me out of the truck, and we walked to where a tree stood. In the crook of the tree was a bulge, which Granny pointed to and told me there was a rock that had been placed there many years before and the tree had grown around it over time. She told me about her sister, Mae, who had been the prettiest girl in Forsyth County and how she had been engaged to be married. She told me Mae was going to her Aunt's house after church one Sunday in 1912 when she was hit over the head with that rock and left to die by a black man. She said Mae was hit several times with the rock with such force that her skull was caved in on one side and her eye had come out of its socket. When they found Mae, she was close to death and she developed pneumonia and eventually died of her injuries. Granny said two black men had been put on trial and were sentenced to death for what they had done to Mae.

Some might think my Granny was sowing the seeds of hate and prejudice in me as we stood at the base of that tree, but as I stood there in shock gazing up at the bark-covered bulge of a rock Granny simply said to me, “Honey, don’t ever let hate make a place in your heart.”

I had always heard my Granny say that my mother had been the prettiest girl in the county when she was a young girl. My mother used to tell my sister and me we were the prettiest girls in the county. My preadolescent self surmised if something so brutal could befall my Granny’s sister, it might happen to my Mom, my sister, or me. I had come to the foot of the tree in innocence, but I left with fear placed squarely in the center of my heart. It was such an emotionally conflicting experience—having fear scared into the same heart in which my Granny was cautioning me not to let hate take root. Fear feeds the roots of prejudice, and the South of the 50s and 60s was fertile growing ground for setting up a battle in me to understand what my wise Granny had said about not letting hate make a place in my heart.

The image of the tree seared deeply into my psyche, igniting a small flame within me, and I became increasingly curious about Mae and the events surrounding her death. Most times when I would ask questions of my family I would be ignored or answered with statements such as, “All that happened a long time ago. None of us were living back then.” I eventually heard there had been an alleged second attack as Mae lay dying, and that a third black man accused of participating in Mae’s death had been taken from the jail before the trial, dragged around the town, and lynched by a mob. I was told all the blacks left or were run out of Forsyth County after Mae was attacked. My friends knew blacks were not welcome in Forsyth County because a young white girl had been raped and murdered many years before, but they did not know it was my great aunt. I did not want them to know my connection to Forsyth County as it had become the “elephant in the room” I could talk to no one about—family or friends.

Moving to New Jersey once I got married seemed the right choice. The reason I gave my parents was I thought my husband would have a much easier time selling real estate back in New Jersey where he had friends and family. The reason I did not voice that was I did not want to raise my children in an environment where prejudice still flourished like kudzu. Imagine how surprised I was to find out that prejudice had not stopped at the Mason-Dixon Line. The in-your-face, out-in-the-open prejudice of the white/black Southern variety was simply replaced by the subtle behind-your-back variety, which included ethnic slurs I had never heard before.

Gradually, the “elephant in the room” grew larger and heavier until I could not ignore it any longer. I had begun to put together a list of questions I needed the answers to if I was to find any peace. Did Mae name her attacker before she died? Did any of our family members participate in the jailbreak and lynching of the man from the Forsyth County jail? Did the alleged second attack on Mae really take place or was it just an excuse to arrest more blacks to satisfy the lynch mob’s thirst for revenge? Did the blacks leave Forsyth of their own free will or were they forced to leave? What happened to the black-owned land of those who left? I also began to be obsessed with knowing about those involved in Mae’s death. What were their names? Did they know her before the attack? Were any of the three men who paid for Mae’s life with theirs really innocent? I did little in the way of research except to formulate the questions and occasionally quiz my family, all the while knowing I would eventually have to deal with the elephant.

No matter our differences, we all have defining moments in our lives that shape who we are and which path we choose to follow. Sometimes we veer off the route most often traveled and decide to go off-road for a guaranteed bumpy ride. I feel a bit like a road weary warrior at the end of a long adventure-filled trip through the rough terrain of what race means in this country.

In August of 1987, I visited my family in Georgia, eight months pregnant with my fourth daughter, when I discovered I had hit the place in the road where I had to pull the emergency brake and unload the elephant. The whole area had been in an uproar since January when the largest civil rights march since the Civil Rights Movement took place in Forsyth County, with 12,000 demonstrators who protested Forsyth County’s efforts to keep African Americans out. The March captured national headlines and Oprah Winfrey did a show from Forsyth County, which is included in the twentieth anniversary collection of Winfrey’s top shows.

While in Georgia I found out there was going to be a Ku Klux Klan rally, so I decided to take my children. There could be no better place to witness the face of hate. I took them to the fifth floor in the building where my Mom worked on the downtown “square.” During the rally, I noticed people watching from a distance, some of them joining hands in what looked like prayer and others who turned their backs in a silent protest to the message being broadcast on the loudspeaker. Suddenly, I asked myself: was it enough to silently protest hidden away on the fifth floor and continue to deny my past? I realized I needed to find my voice. With hope I would be

able to someday tell my children with my words and my actions, in the same way Granny had told me at the foot of the tree, to not let hate make a place in their hearts.

I began to develop a plan of action which included stepping up my efforts to get the answers to my questions and going back to college. The 1990s brought affordable computer technology and another route to find the answers to some of my questions. My experiences at Rutgers University, the years spent with a mentor learning about court-based and school-based mediation, and my years working with the Camden County Human Relations Commission prepared me in countless ways to garner the confidence that was always inside me and turn it into the courage I needed to confront my difficult family history.

At the end of the diversity training I attended in 2000, I felt as if I was turned inside out and I was emotionally spent. For the first time in my life my eyes were opened to see the world as it exists outside of my whiteness. In those sessions I had to tip over my overflowing urn of privilege and watch and hear how rarely, if ever, the people of color in the room experienced the same benefit of privilege that came from my white skin. It was as if I had been living in what I like to refer to as “the matrix world of race” where, because I was white, I was for the most part oblivious to what life is like on a daily basis for a person of color in this country.

It happens to me almost every day now, whether out in the world, watching television, reading the paper or a magazine, or talking on the phone with a friend. I am aware of the world around me in a way so different from my before self. Recently I found myself waiting at the Customer Service Desk of a large bookstore. I heard an announcement for assistance needed at Customer Service and saw a young African-American man headed toward me. As he walked up behind me and the clerk approached the desk it occurred to me the young man may have been at the desk before me and had left to ask for someone to assist him. I turned around and apologized and said I had realized he most likely had been the one to summon help and I moved behind him in the line. He got his question answered, turned to me, smiled and thanked me for letting him go before me. I smiled back and said, “No problem.” But there was a problem. I have been in similar lines before and did not make the same offer because subconsciously, as a white person, I thought I was entitled to take his place and be served before him.

Since my conversion to the role of “white ally”, I have seen white racial privilege exercised frequently. On one occasion, I pointed out to a jewelry department sales clerk that there had been a woman of color in line before me and another white woman had just stepped in front of both of us. I got an angry reaction from the white woman, who denied her behavior, and the woman of color, who was angry because I had spoken on her behalf. When the person of color left in a huff, I turned and followed her as I did not want to assume the second-in-line position either. While I meant well, I could certainly understand the anger of the African American woman as I had not given her the opportunity to speak for herself. I had taken away her voice, an experience I’m sure she was all too familiar with. I still find I have much to learn, but I know much can be gained on both sides of the racial divide by having “Honest Conversations about Race.”

When my friend made the observation that I needed to address the loneliness I had been experiencing I wanted to find someone with whom I could identify who was white. I asked Mr. Jaspin, the author of the book *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, if, in his research about events that led to racial cleansings, he had come across any other descendants from the white communities who were similar to me. My heart fell when he said that in all of the cases he had researched the descendants of the whites who drove the exodus of blacks from their communities became the enforcers to keep them out for future generations. I felt as if I was an anomaly and my feelings of being alone were reinforced.

Then I happened upon a book called *Our Town* by Cynthia Carr about her hometown of Marion, Indiana and the lynching of two young black men in 1930. The book chronicles her search for the truth of what happened and her grandfather’s role, if any, as a KKK member. So much of her journey has been my journey and my loneliness dissipated to some degree in the comfort I found in her words.

In *Our Town*, Ms. Carr quotes Chilean legal philosopher and activist José Zalaquett who said, “A community should not wipe out a part of its past, because it leaves a vacuum that will be filled by lies and contradictory, confusing accounts of what happened. Perpetrators need to acknowledge the wrong they did. Why? It creates a communal starting point. To make a clean break from the past, a moral beacon needs to be established between the past and the future” (Carr 307).

What happened in my family's past filtered through the generations into me as guilt and shame. As I worked to get answers to my questions around Mae's death, I came to understand the label of victim could be applied to many others besides Mae. In particular, I came to believe the young man who was lynched, Rob Edwards, was innocent and was lynched with some arm of my family most likely present. I also came to believe the two young men who were publicly executed, Ernest Knox and Oscar Daniels, did not receive a fair trial for many reasons, one of which was the existence of the same names of two of the all-white jurors on the Forsyth County Sawnee Klan 125 List (Shadburn 478). I also came to believe some of our extended family most likely participated in the expulsion of black property owners. Mae's relatives and friends would have been consumed with anger and grief over losing her. Coupled with the lynch mob mentality and racist attitudes of the time which viewed blacks as non-citizens, some most likely participated in the wave of terror.

The remorse I feel, even two generations removed, is matched only by the desire for our History to accurately record what occurred in so many places in our country. To some extent, this desire was satisfied in February 2008. Marco Williams, the award-winning filmmaker of "Two Towns of Jasper," released a new documentary entitled "Banished," which investigates three places in the United States where similar racial expulsions took place. One of those locations is Forsyth County, Georgia. Finally, the voices of the victimized descendants will be heard.

The friend I refer to in my opening paragraph and I found a path to healing ourselves by sharing the shadowed pain of our respective pasts. Our hope is that more honest conversations about race will occur because of the book, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, and the documentary, *Banished*, and that the road to true racial reconciliation will be a little easier for all of us to travel.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Deborah V. Vermaat graduated from Rutgers University with a major in Sociology and a minor in Criminal Justice. She worked with a non-profit organization throughout the 1990's to provide training and resources in the field of conflict resolution for staff and students in schools in New Jersey and Delaware. She was an active member of the Camden County Human Relations Commission from 1993-2000, serving as Secretary/Treasurer, a member of the Education Committee and Bias Crimes/Crisis Intervention Team. She currently serves as a volunteer mediator for the Municipal Court Mediation Program in Camden County. Ms. Vermaat can be contacted via e-mail: debbie.vermaat@gmail.com