Right Brained:

A Southern White Boy's Introspective on Racial and Social Equity

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Preface

"Why do so many left-handed people have bad handwriting?" asked my 11-year-old daughter after attempting to decipher one of my hand-written notes. Her furrowed brow told me that she had prior experience trying to read other lefties' runes, so I reacted and shared my right-brained perspective.

Off the bat, I complained about having to use right-handed school desks which required me to twist my body to fully access the writing surface. This, I explained, is why I write "upside down" and showed her an exaggerated example of how I hold a pen. I ranted about only having access to spiral-bound notebooks constructed for right-handers, where the metal binding dug into my hand whenever I needed to write near the left page margin. And lastly, I described the southpaw problem of smearing when the knife edge of my hand rubbed across pencil or fresh ink. In no uncertain terms, I let her know that the environment in which I learned to write was designed to accommodate a right-handed majority. So, as a lefty, I was forced to adjust and overcome these obstacles. However, I obviously did a shoddy job because my penmanship is pretty darn crappy today.

I was unsure why our conversation continued to gnaw at me, when any other time I would have responded and put it out of my mind. And then I became aware that I was working through more complex and challenging issues. You need to understand that at the time I was still unsettled by the images of violence in Charlottesville on my TV screen as well as by the rift between my White friends and acquaintances about the Confederate statue debate. I was trying to make sense of the violence and subsequent conversations about race and history, while scrutinizing my own beliefs and values in the process.

While I know that racial discrimination and left-handedness are not equivalents (they are about as far apart as possible), my daughter's question reminded me that she, as a right-hander, did not experience the external barriers that affected and frustrated me. I recognized that while I was disgusted by the hatred exhibited by White nationalists, neo-Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan and sympathized with counter-protesters (many of whom were African American), as a White man, I could not and will never fully comprehend—no matter how good my intentions—what it means to be a person of color in this nation. Not for a single second. I will never share with a person of color the depth of hurt that comes from a racial slur. I have never been told explicitly that I don't belong or that I was inferior. I have not been the target of purposefully designed inequities in political, economic, and social systems that impeded my access to education; my ability to borrow money and accumulate and retain wealth; my right to vote or participate in the democratic process; or my receiving a fair verdict in a court of law. And lastly, I never experienced the fear and horror of White American God-fearing terrorists burning a cross in my yard or lynching me or a family member.

Prompted by the Charlottesville riot and vitriol surrounding actions to remove symbols of the Confederacy from our public spaces, this essay is about my experiences and how I, as a White man who grew up in Mississippi, align and calibrate my

personal values with regard to issues of race and equity.

Far from unimpeachable, I neither hold myself up as an example of righteousness nor do I assume that others should share my perspective without the benefit of the experiences that I have been able to access through my job. I do not expect that anyone will want to read this essay, but I feel compelled to write it, nonetheless, and express what I value and believe and—more importantly—why I believe what I believe. This exercise is a means of catharsis for me during an emotional, disconcerting, and chaotic point in time.

PART 1:

Seeking Unvarnished Truth and Forging Values along my Crooked Path

I was born in 1970; the same year the Beatles called it quits and the nation almost lost Jim Lovell and the Apollo 13 crew during the third attempt to land on the moon. I grew up in d'Iberville, Mississippi—then a sleepy little town on the Gulf Coast. My father retired from Keesler Air Force base after 20 years of military service, and my family remained on the Coast, making me the only child of three able to attend 1st through 12th grades in the same school district.

My father hailed from Michigan and met my mother after she and my grandparents moved north from Mississippi. Maybe it was my parents' upbringing in Michigan or their experience in the Air Force, but race was not something we often spoke about in our home. My neighborhood was majority White moderate-income families; however, my circle of neighborhood buddies included several children of color. I never received any grief from my family about my chums being African American, Vietnamese, or Filipino. Maybe this tacit acceptance was a by-product of living in a scrappy middle-income neighborhood located near a military base, which attracted people from different races, ethnicities, and geographies.

Let me be clear on two points, though. In no way am I suggesting that racism did not exist on the Gulf Coast, in my neighborhood, or in my schools. Nor am I pretending that I did not exhibit racist behaviors, because I know now that was not the case. Oblivious to my trespasses, I never considered the possibility that anything I said could be construed as offensive to someone who did not look like me. I was simply ignorant about such things. Again, I know differently now.

After leaving high school and the Gulf Coast, I became more conscious of racial inequity and prejudice. Instances became more exposed and prominent, such as a racially segregated public school dance in Starkville, Mississippi (supposedly a mutual decision based on students' differing musical tastes). Maybe this acknowledgment was due to the change in geography or my maturation. I'm unsure. In Mississippi's state capitol and its small towns alike in the early 1990s, I could see the lingering effects of the White exodus from public schools to private academies that occurred between 1950 and 1965, when private school enrollment tripled as White families rebuffed desegregation.[1] Decades later, population demographics were not in line with the racial composition of some public schools and private academies. Segregation had not been eradicated by landmark court decisions as my civics books alluded; it was legally perpetuated in Mississippi by a private school network that popped up over night during desegregation, excluding people of color and pricing out low-income White people.

This disparity was made clear to me in Jackson, Mississippi. My wife taught for eleven years in an urban public Title-I school. The school was

located squarely in the center of a majority White upward middle-class and affluent neighborhood, yet the racial composition of the student body of roughly 500 was about 97% African American, 2% Hispanic/Latino, and 1% White and other. Just two blocks away on the same street sat a private academy that was established in 1959, with about 1,100 students enrolled. Interestingly, the academy's demographics were on the opposite end of the racial spectrum at 96% White, even though the majority Black public school was literally a stone's throw away.[2]

In my early thirties, I accepted a job at a foundation in Mississippi. At the time, the institution was undergoing a significant transformation in its mission, strengthening its commitment to issues of race and equity, and diversifying its staff and board. For 18 months, I attended numerous community meetings in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi that tackled issues of race, equity, and power. The dialogue was honest, uncomfortable, and, at times, inflammatory. The foundation's staff and board along with other regional leaders sought out and learned from others in the Mid-South, Chicago, Brazil, and South Africa whose community-building efforts were highly regarded.

My time in Brazil was the catalyst for my interest and concern for issues of race and equity. I had seen intense poverty in the Delta region of Mississippi, but I was shocked to the core by the disparity in São Paulo. Mansions stood on a sheer cliff directly up against *favelas* and lean-to shanty cities. The poor were many and growing. I heard stories from young and old Afro-Brazilians that mirrored the discrimination people of color faced in the U.S., but the economic and social plight of many of these people seemed so much worse. It was during this trip that I could visualize what cities in the United States could look like if income and racial inequity were to become even more entrenched. The vision was frightening and formed my resolve against perpetuating these circumstances and conditions.

PART 2:

Charlottesville: Testing my Values

After visiting promising efforts aimed at dismantling long-standing systems of racism and power in the U.S. and abroad, I was confronted by a difficult question. Why should White folks invest our time and energy to address complex and divisive issues like race, if we believe that we have little to gain and much to lose? We in the U.S. have never done a good job at touting the benefits of a rising tide that raises all boats. We too often polarize and act in our own best interests guided by fear of change and fear of losing power or social capital.

Despite good intentions, I can only filter information through a lens created by my personal experiences as a White man. I cannot fully appreciate the domino effect of slavery that evolved into the systemic barriers and discrimination negatively affecting the social and financial trajectory of people of color today. Conveniently, I have not had to nor wished to see it. With varying degrees of success, I try to compensate for this blind spot by doing my level best to listen to and respect input from people of color before I rush to offer commentary about hot-button topics such as Confederate memorials. This is not to suggest that I or other White folks should remain silent in these conversations. It is critical that we share our voices, perspectives, and ideas. It is also just as important today as it was in the 1960s for White folks to find the moral courage to call out and denounce injustice, inequity, and violence when we witness it.

Some refer to the recent demonstration in Charlottesville as "the Rise" of White supremacy

ideology. I argue that racist sentiment is not rising. Like the poor, racism has always been with us; it has just been simmering underground. And while I was dumbfounded by the boldness of the Charlottesville demonstrators who voiced their hatred for and intolerance of people who do not look like themselves or share their faith, I was reminded a week later by the counter protest in Boston that Americans are overwhelmingly in favor of diversity and better race relations, although we are often conflicted about how best to achieve them. So in my roles of father and staff at a private foundation, I would be remiss to ignore this opportunity to hold a mirror to myself and reflect on where I stand in this moment in time when racial hatred and bigotry are on display alongside and intertwined with the debate about Confederate memorials. More importantly, my two young children will witness my reaction and it will likely influence their values and world view. What is the message that I am sending to my kids?

The Charlottesville demonstration—like others that I assume will follow—rallied around the removal of a symbol of White pride and Confederate history: this instance, a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. The eruption of emotion around Confederate memorials is likely a symptom of a much deeper problem. After numerous conversations and posts in my social media feeds, I believe it is fair and accurate to suggest that collectively we have a significant knowledge gap about our nation's history, particularly about the rationale for secession, Lincoln's intent to preserve the Union, Jim Crow, and the American civil rights movement. Further, we seem to exhibit little willingness to listen and critique our long-held beliefs—even when we are proven to be incorrect.

While simply tearing down, permanently removing, or relocating Confederate memorials will not miraculously change people's hearts and minds, civil discourse on history and opposing viewpoints might help each of us become more knowledgeable and empathetic. Instead of fear and distrust, we can use facts and rational thought to shape our values as individuals and citizens and to guide how we engage one another. The irony in this debate is the assertion that history is being re-written or erased when, in reality, the push-back is to inform *more* people about the facts of the Civil War and the legal policies and social oppression that followed and continued to marginalize people of color.

PART 3:

Confederate Iconography: Taking a Stand

I grew up immersed in a culture that celebrated and idolized White Southern heritage. At the time, I had no problem with the display on Biloxi beach that featured the eight flags that have flown over Mississippi, which included the Confederate battle flag and the Mississippi state flag with the Confederate battle flag integrated into its design. And while I feel much differently today, I understand why some do not share my opinion. I am proud to be from Mississippi. Do I truly believe that most of those who are adamantly opposed to any changes to Confederate memorials and icons are inherently racist and evil people? **No, I do not.** White Southerners can be proud and stubborn. That is what makes so many of us resilient, interesting, and creative—all positive characteristics. On the other hand, I also believe we can be closed-minded and purposely ignorant to the perspectives and feelings of others. We can become too easily suspect of those who suggest or demand change, which will usually lead us into a defensive posture that overrides our abilities to rationalize and empathize. This brings my attention to Confederate icons.

Once you learn something, it is hard to un-learn it. I formalized my stance on the statue debate when I learned that the most prolific establishment of Confederate memorials occurred in two periods decades after the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865. The first started 30-years later and immediately followed the U.S. Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896, which upheld legal segregation through the "separate but equal" ideology. Over the next two decades, installations of Confederate memorials on courthouse grounds increased significantly.[3] The second boom followed the U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* decided in 1954, striking down states' public education "separate but equal" laws. This period of Confederate propagation continued throughout the American civil rights movement. During a time of violent opposition to desegregating public schools and universities, the presence of Confederate iconography increased on school campuses.[4] These periods of key civil rights battles demonstrated the intent of Whites to intimidate people of color and establish a one-sided narrative that celebrated White segregationist history.

For what it's worth, my preference would be to contextualize Confederate memorials located in public spaces and not to leave them in the state that many exist now, which is to revere leaders, romanticize Confederate heroism, and/or promulgate a historically-inaccurate story of protecting states' rights. Confederate states and leadership explicitly stated that the sole reason for secession was to protect slavery.[5] We should use this opportunity to factually display history of slavery and the Civil War and its impact on all people, including the often-varnished or missing narratives about the African-American experience. In some places, we may be able to interpret memorials where they stand. In others, we may need to relocate memorials elsewhere, either to private property or to locations that are considerate of all residents and away from courthouses and public schools.

I arrived at a point where I cannot in good conscience reconcile the Southern heritage argument with the history of violence, terror, and oppression that is intertwined with the Civil War and its iconography. As a human being and an admitted wayward Christian, I believe in the message behind First (1) Corinthians 12:26, which reads, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." We may fail to find a solution to the problem, but we must agree that many Black and White citizens do not wish to continue to hold these symbols and monuments up for reverence in our public spaces without accurately framing their more complete, shared stories.

I believe most individuals seek connection to something larger than themselves. Some find this connection with religion. Others may gain association through community service. If this notion of connectedness is as important to human beings as I suspect it is, then I fail to understand why the connection to our past—specifically White segregationist history—must come at the expense of connecting to our fellow woman and man. I strive to be right-brained and right-hearted and to believe that I too will benefit if my neighbor prospers. I purposely choose not to rejoice while others suffer.

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1 Southern Education Foundation website, "A History of Private Schools and Race in the American South." http://www.southerneducation.org/Our-Strategies/Research-and-Publications/Race-Ethnicity-Landing-Pages/A-History-of-Private-Schools-Race-in-the-American.aspx

2 USASchoolInfo website search for "Jackson Academy in Jackson, Mississippi." Note: The website provides conflicting data in the number of students enrolled (i.e., 1,134 or 1,271), which affects the percentage race of students presented in the essay. I used the 1,134 enrollment number since it was provided in a chart as well as used in a graph to calculate percentage race. The calculation in the chart is incorrect based on the enrollment number provided. http://www.usaschoolinfo.com/school/jackson-academy-jackson-mississippi.108799/enrollment

3 Hunter, Booth and Jamie Kazzire, Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy, Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016, pp. 12-13.

4 Hunter, Booth and Jamie Kazzire, Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy, Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016, pp. 12-13.

5 Example of slavery as the rationale for state secession: Excerpts from the Mississippi's Declaration of Causes for Secession.

> "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world. Its labor supplies the product which constitutes by far the largest and most important portions of commerce of the earth. These products are peculiar to the climate verging on the tropical regions, and by an imperious law of nature, none but the black race can bear exposure to the tropical sun. These products have become necessities of the world, and a blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization. That blow has been long aimed at the institution, and was at the point of reaching its consummation. There was no choice left us but submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the Union, whose principles had been subverted to work out our ruin. That we do not overstate the dangers to our institution, a reference to a few facts will sufficiently prove.
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> "They assume that the negro is equal, and hence conclude that he is entitled to equal privileges and rights with the white man. If their premises were correct, their conclusions would be logical and just but their premise being wrong, their whole argument fails."