

Coming of Age and White American Entitlement

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Coming of age is difficult for every individual. It occurs in different ways and at different times. It is important to consider the person's background and experiences to get the full meaning.

You might imagine that I have great difficulty having empathy for middle class, white, American children for whom coming of age consists of losing their skis at Aspen during family vacation at age 5; refusing to eat because the maid was sick and could not clean their room; placing third in the local Spelling Bee at age 10; having to settle for a used car on their 16th birthday instead of a new SUV; getting only a stretch limo instead of the super stretch limo on Prom night; and being able to travel abroad for only one year before attending college.

For example, consider the following:

Mabel York

My mother Mabel Daves (York) was the second youngest of 15 children born to a couple in a small town in North Carolina. She was born in January 1915. Her mother died in childbirth with twins in 1918. My mother and several of her siblings were shipped to a Catholic orphanage and school in Philadelphia. She was raised and schooled in this orphanage until she was 15 (in 1930). At the height of the Great Depression, the nuns who ran the orphanage had to make some difficult decisions. Should they try to keep all of the children and risk not being able to feed them, or let some of the older children go off into the world. At age 15 my mother was told that she would have to leave the orphanage, because she was fortunate enough to have older siblings living in the Boston area. She and two of her sisters left the orphanage and moved to Boston to live with one of their older sisters. Because it was the middle of the Great Depression, it was not feasible for my mother to go to high school. She took odd jobs and worked mostly as a housemaid to pay for her keep. In 1936 at age 21, she married and over the next 13 years had 13 pregnancies, 6 children, 4 miscarriages, and 3 abortions. In January 1950 our family (mother, father, and 6 children) moved into the Orchard Park Housing Project in Roxbury, MA. In 1956 my parents became legally separated. Up until this time my mother had worked primarily as a housemaid and a caterer's assistant. Many a day we had food, because my mom was allowed to bring home Bar Mitzvah leftovers. The separation and 5 kids to feed (my older brother had joined the Air Force) meant getting a higher paying job. After working for 3 months (at \$28.00 per week) at Gilchrist's, a downtown department store, my mother borrowed \$250.00 from the neighborhood Jewish money lender (Mr. Glazer) and purchased a power sewing machine. She started her own business making furniture slip covers for rich suburbanites. She consistently worked 16-18 hours per day, smoking at least 4 packs of cigarettes a day. She taught my siblings and me how to cut fabric and prepare the sections of a slip cover, while she primarily did the stitching. The business was enormously successful until December 15, 1960 when one of my younger brothers, Steven, was killed. Steven was crushed to death by a white racist truck driver driving an 18-wheeler on a "No Trucks Allowed" street near the Housing Project. After Steven's death my mother became depressed and began to drink heavily. She moved the family from the housing project to a large apartment in a Black middle-class area of Dorchester and continued

her business but not with the same intensity. She retired from work around 1970 and eventually moved in with my younger sister around 1976. She died of lung cancer in 1979.

So, when did she come of age? At age 3 when her parents died and she was shipped off to an orphanage? At age 15 when she was turned out of the orphanage? At age 37 after 13 pregnancies? At age 41 when her marriage crumbled and she was forced to start a business in order to feed her five children? Or, at age 45 when she lost her 12 year old son to a white racist?

William Everett York, Jr.

My father, William Everett York Jr., the second of three sons was born in Fairhaven, MA in 1914. When he was 4 years old, his parents divorced, and my father and his two brothers were sent to live in a Catholic orphanage (St. Mary's Home). He always talked of the visits on Sundays by his father, his father's new wife, and their daughter. They would come up to the fence of the orphanage and speak to the three boys through the fence. All he could remember was how painful it was to watch his father drive away with his new family in his fancy new car. After some time, the boys were sent to live in a foster home with a woman named Mrs. Sykes, who took a deep interest in the boys and taught them basic principles. When my father was 13 years old, his father came to retrieve the boys and brought them to live in his home in Roxbury, MA. According to my father the boys were frequently abused, beaten badly, and sometimes chained to the wood burning stove. After a few months of this treatment, my father decided to leave. He rode his bicycle through the Blue Hills the 60 miles from Boston to Mrs. Sykes' home in New Bedford, MA. Unfortunately, his father came to retrieve him and returned him to Boston. The boys were sent to school and eventually went on to high school. My father's great solace came from running track. He excelled at the 440 and 880 yard races outdoors and the 600 and 1000 yard races indoors. Although my father's older brother, Craig, who was an excellent student, graduated from high school and enrolled in Lincoln University in 1931 during the height of the Great Depression, my father had to repeat the 11th grade and did not graduate until 1933. After high school he worked a number of odd jobs (a grocery store clerk, a window washer, and the Works Progress Administration or WPA) until he was able to buy a car and start his own jitney business. He met my mother; they married, and had six children. He was a chain smoker, an avid contract bridge player, and he worked for the U.S. Post Office for most of his adult life. In 1956 at age 42 he became separated from my mother and lived alone the remainder of his life. At age 55 he suffered his first heart attack and stroke. After six strokes and six heart attacks he died of a stroke in December 1990.

So, when did he come of age? At age 4 when he was sent off to an orphanage? At age 13 when he rode his bicycle 60 miles to get away from his father's beatings? At age 17 when he repeated the 11th grade? At age 20 when he worked for the WPA? At age 41 when his marriage crumbled? Or, at age 46 when he lost his 12 year old son to a white racist?

Bryant W. York

I was born May 15, 1945, the third of six children born to William Everett York and Mabel Daves York. At age 4 my family moved to the Orchard Park Housing Project in Roxbury, MA. At age 6 my mom took all of the children to "City Point" beach on a hot summer day. The beach was located in South Boston (an Irish section of the city). While we were lying on the blanket getting some sun, a little white girl about three years old walked over to us and pointed at us one at a time, saying "You're a nigger; you're a nigger; you're a nigger; you're a nigger; you're a nigger; and you're a nigger." Afterwards my little sister turned to my mom and asked, "What's a nigger?" From 1950 to 1955 there were race riots in the Orchard Park Housing Project every summer. They usually began around the 4th of July and lasted two to three weeks. During this period bricks were thrown through the windows of our apartment and a few times it was firebombed. Once the riots started the children were made to lie on the floor in the windowless inner hallway of the apartment to avoid glass fragments, bricks, and fire. After 1956 most of the white people moved away and the riots stopped.

When I was 9 my brother let me ride his bike. I left it outside the building to run inside for water and it was quickly stolen. My mother insisted that I go to the Police Station (Station 9) and report the theft. I did not want to go, as getting to Station 9 required passing through the White section of the Housing Project (always a dangerous proposition). Instead of cutting through the White Project, I took a roundabout route past the Stop n Shop and up Dudley St. When I got to the Police Station I told the officer at the desk that my bike had been stolen. He looked at me and said, "You're a nigger; you had better get the hell out of here before I arrest you for stealing a bike." Of course, I got out of there quickly and I learned to stay away from police and never to call them if I needed assistance.

When I was 10 my baseball team was required to play a baseball game in South Boston in order to advance in our league's competition. Chauncey Pope and Bunky Cousins were the coaches for our team, the Charles Street Giants. They drove us to South Boston on the team bus (paid for by the Charles Street AME Church) and as we got off the bus the people shouted "nigger, nigger, nigger!" We went ahead and started the game. Our team was superior and we scored 19 runs in the first inning. At this point the white umpire became angry that a Black team was beating a white team so badly. He threw one of the extra balls he was holding at one of our players. The ball hit the player (Arthur Hoak) in the head and knocked him unconscious. Bunky Cousins ran to the aid of Arthur, but before he could get to Arthur six or seven white men with baseball bats came from behind the seats. They attacked Bunky and beat him badly. He fought back and actually dropped a couple of them (Bunky was about 5'5" and 180 lbs, all muscle). He had several broken bones, both eyes swollen shut, his face was totally bloody. When it was over he did not want any of the players to help him to the bus. He limped to the bus with all of us around him. Rodney King's beating was nothing compared to the beating that Bunky Cousins took that day. Bunky was a warrior and I will never forget him.

When I was 11 years old, Charlie Russell became the new coach of our basketball team at the Roxbury Neighborhood House. Charlie Russell was Bill Russell's brother and he needed something to do while he was being carried on the Boston Celtics reserve squad. He brought Bill Russell and Casey Jones to the Neighborhood House to give us instruction in basketball. So, I

was fortunate to meet Bill Russell and Casey Jones at an early age. Once they brought us tickets so that we could see a Celtics game. In those days Blacks had to sit at the top of Boston Garden in the section called “Nigger Heaven”.

When I was 12 years old I started Boston Latin School. The first day of school I met the other Black student in my home room. His name was Robert Haughton. When the teacher (Mr. Hechinger) started the class, the very first thing he said was, “There are two niggers in this class. I want you two to sit on opposite sides of the room.” This set the tone for the 7th grade. The student who sat next to me, Harvey Berlin, took this as his license to call me “nigger” all day long. To this day, I have to thank Harvey Berlin for helping me develop strong concentration skills. I learned to concentrate in spite of his constant attempts to distract me. Mr. Jamieson, my Latin teacher, got wind of Mr. Hechinger’s nigger remarks and confronted him in my home room. Jamieson told Hechinger to always address me as Mr. York. Hechinger stopped calling me “nigger” and he retired at the end of the year. Despite the distractions I completed the 7th grade with one of the top grade point averages and was selected to the advanced math program. Harvey Berlin did not make it into the advanced math program, but he did graduate. Robert Haughton didn’t fair so well and dropped out of Latin School before the end of the year.

On December 15, 1960 a white truck driver from Iowa decided to take a short cut through the Orchard Park Housing Project on a small “No Trucks Allowed” street. It had snowed heavily the day before and school was out. My younger brothers were having a snowball fight with friends when the truck driver started shouting obscenities at them. He drove the truck up onto the sidewalk and crushed my younger brother Steven under the back wheels of an 18-wheeler. When my mom rushed out to the scene to help my brother, the truck driver threw her to the ground and shouted, “It’s only a nigger!” He assumed my mom was white because she had light skin. During the period leading up to the court case, my mother’s lawyer insisted that I scoop my brother’s blood out of the snow and keep it in our freezer as evidence, while the trucking company’s lawyer insisted that the driver’s punishment should be a fine of \$25 for driving onto the sidewalk.

So when did I come of age? At age 6 on that South Boston beach? At ages 5 to 10 lying in the hallway of our apartment in the Orchard Park Housing Project during the race riots? At age 9 at Boston Police Station 9? At age 10 when I witnessed the brutal beating of Bunky Cousins by white racists in South Boston? At age 11 when I discovered that “Nigger Heaven” was a section of Boston Garden? At age 12 when I was welcomed into Boston Latin School by my racist home room teacher? At age 15 when my brother Steven was killed by a white racist truck driver and or when I watched the snow melt around my brother’s blood in an old mayonnaise bottle in our refrigerator?