

“When I hear Malcolm X talk, I feel electrified”

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing July 27, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing* 

“We need to decolonize the school curriculum.”

Lehigh Valley student, July 2020

Person. Woman. Man. Camera. TV.

Gadfly will never forget “Autherine Lucy.”

He first heard the phrase in 1956.

Autherine Lucy was the first Black student to attend the University of Alabama. For all of three days, that is, before the riots totally broke out. And she was suspended, later expelled. But she did it. She broke the barrier.

Gadfly was 16 in 1956, and he associates Autherine Lucy with the end of his childhood, with the end of his innocence.

Childhood and innocence ended not with sexual initiation but when he said to himself, “That’s not right. That’s not fair.”

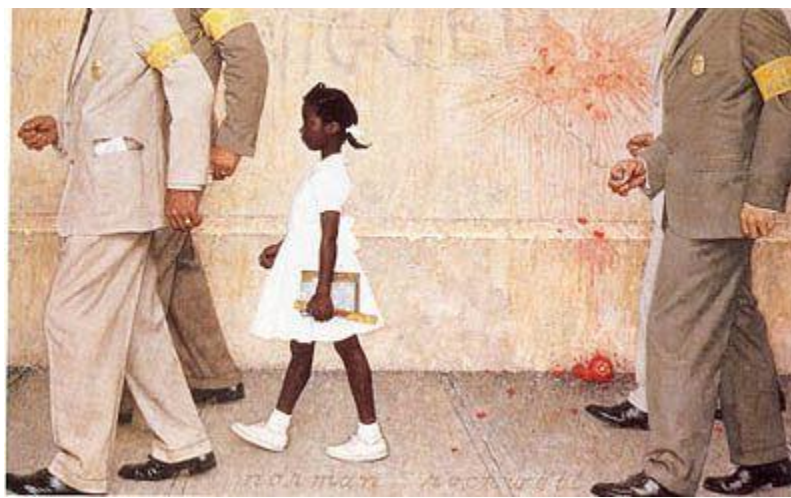
After such awareness you can never go home again.

You are forever changed.

The scene repeated in 1960. Autherine Lucy was 26, seeking additional education. But Ruby Bridges was just 6, going to first grade, escorted by U.S. Marshalls as white parents pulled their kids from the school lest they be contaminated.

A scene that shattered even the idyllic consciousness of Gadfly’s Norman Rockwell, whose *Look* magazine centerfold titled Ruby with the word we

dare not now name in a painting that would hang in the White House during the Obama years.



What happened to Ruby, “That’s not right. That’s not fair.”

After such awareness you never want to go home again.

And eventually our culture put this kind of disgraceful horror behind us.

Nobody is keeping Black children from school any more.

But what's happening to them in school?

“We need to decolonize the school curriculum,” said a local Black high school student during the recent forum arranged by Allentown City Councilwoman Ce-Ce Gerlach following the murder of George Floyd that Gadfly has covered over several posts lately.

“Decolonize.”

That verb struck Gadfly — who is admittedly old and not in the educational trenches any more — as decidedly odd. Where would that student get that phrase, he thought? What high schooler talks like that? What did the word signify to him?

He was saying that these students had been admitted to school but only as part of a subjugated race and taught only what the colonizers felt was best for the colonizers — that is, for instance, taught about Martin Luther King, Jr., and the “end” of racism, taught something glaringly at odds with their everyday felt reality.

Listen to the students in that **part of the forum**.

Where is knowledge of Angela Davis, Bayard Rustin, Sally Hemings, Nat Turner, the Black Panthers, and Malcolm X, they ask?

“When I hear Malcolm X talk, I feel electrified,” one student said orgasmically.***

And where is knowledge of Africa, of the great Kings and Queens in Africa?

Gadfly fears getting too nerdy. But in pitching the “**Bethlehem Moment**” series to you he has said “history is our cultural memory,” and if you’ll just think of someone in your ken with Alzheimer’s/dementia, you will realize that life is not livable above the vegetable level without memory.

It holds for a culture as well as a person.

Gadfly gets it. Gets what the students are saying.

The Black history “we” teach may be well-intentioned, but for some students it is evidently not doing the job.

And it might be called an example of systemic racism, a phrase that in some circles dare not be named.

Gadfly knows something about tight curricula. If the Dr. Roys of this world decide they need to present Black history more comprehensively, they have their work cut out for them. And in the midst of a pandemic too.

Speaking of which you are invited to the next post.

****And which white folk can readily understand if they simply saw Spike Lee’s amazing 1992 “Malcolm X” on TCM Saturday afternoon. Gadfly had worked on this film with white students in his **Reel American History project** and knew it well but was nevertheless transfixed again for 3 1/2 hours.*