The Transformation of a Jewish Girl from Brooklyn: Reflections on the Meaning of Jacksonville and Other Life Experiences, Moving from Ignorance and Innocence to Awareness and Action

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Abstract: This essay is a reflection on my growth and development as a Jewish adolescent girl after unexpected encounters with segregation. It explores a series of events that transformed my understanding of systemic racism growing up in a virtually all-white working-class community in Brooklyn, New York. It also covers more subtle antisemitism that I experienced during that period without realizing its impact on me until years after. These deep and emotional remembrances surfaced in 2020 after the Republican party had chosen Jacksonville, Florida, as the site of their political convention. Ironically, the date was on the anniversary of the day that there had been a violent "lunch counter" riot years earlier as a result of Black customers being barred from a local diner. This reflection concludes with lessons learned as part of having chosen a career as a social work activist and professor of community organizing and policy.

Keywords**:** social activism, racism, community organizing strategies, antisemitism, cultural divides, de jure segregation, de facto segregation

As a professor of social work, I have been teaching community organizing and social policy for 40+ years as well as leading social work organizations at different periods, all of which have been geared toward social justice and progressive social change. For many reasons, 2020 became a crucial time for me to speak out with both a personal and political agenda—presenting the connections between my personal experiences and public issues. There was one particular news event that resonated deeply and unexpectedly for me and opened up a floodgate of memories, simple but profound ones, with lessons learned that I would like to share with colleagues. It was this:

In August 2020, President Trump and the Republican leadership announced they were going to Jacksonville, Florida, for their convention on August 27. It was subsequently cancelled by Trump noting that it was due to the coronavirus (Smith, 2020) (whether this was the real reason or not), but that didn't lessen the impact of its having been scheduled there in the first place. Hearing about that city and the date selected was an assault on my memory. I immediately flashed back to my first airplane trip from Brooklyn, New York, to Jacksonville, Florida, as part of my high school senior spring break in 1959. Jacksonville was the place where my dad had a small children's clothing store in the downtown area, on Forsythe Street to be exact.

While working that week in my dad's store (named for me: "Terry Togs"), I took one particular lunch break and walked around what I recall was a beautiful, well-kept park nearby. I was thirsty, so I found a water fountain. Well, actually, I found two: one marked for "coloreds" and one for "whites only." It wasn't just the words that startled me then—it was where they were and how they got there, presumably. The wall around the park that contained the two water fountains had obviously been built recently. It was made out of granite or marble, an aesthetically

beautifully designed structure. And chiseled right into the stone itself above the sinks were those words. I remember going back to work incredulous and telling my dad what I had just seen. It wasn't just the signs, as bad as they were, but the fact that some official "Body" had defaced the stone by making those instructions permanent. There was no way to erase "colored" and "white" or cover those words over without destroying the whole façade.

Recall that segregated public accommodations had been deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court five years earlier. Separate but equal is inherently unequal was the outcome of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case (1954) and applied to all public spaces (Van Delinder, 2004). I learned subsequently in 1960, one year after I observed that segregated structure in person, that there were violent confrontations in Jacksonville not too far from my dad's store. It all began when a group of young members of the NAACP tried to integrate a lunch counter that still refused to serve Black people. This event became known as "Ax Handle Saturday," so named because a group of whites had attacked them outside the venue with axes and other weapons (Trent, 2020). And the day that it occurred was August 27th, 1960, the very day Trump was going to accept his party's nomination, 60 years later!

I do not know how long those two fountains remained intact, or when the structure was taken down or the words obliterated, and by whom or under whose authorization. I do remember going back to New York that year and thinking how glad I was that we did not have that type of segregated system where I lived. But boy was I wrong! We sure did.

In the New York City of 1959, both physically and culturally, de facto segregation existed—unbeknownst to me, I'm embarrassed now to admit. Can you imagine that I lived for 16 years in Brooklyn, with its population of two million or so people then, and had not interacted with any Black people of significance? Growing up in a working-class neighborhood of Brooklyn, my all-white high school of 5,000 students was divided in half between Jews and Italians, most of whom were the children of immigrants who came from Eastern and Southern Europe only one generation earlier. (I will talk later about the subtle antisemitism prevalent among my Italian American counterparts and their institutions.) Reviewing my high school yearbook of 1,500 senior classmates years later, I noticed the photos of two or three Black and Asian students, but I don't remember ever meeting them or being in class with them. So how did I come to learn that there were actually one million Black people (half of the population of Brooklyn) living in the same borough at that time? Well, that's an interesting and important story in my political awakening.

It was a fall day and my high school, Lafayette, was playing football at Boys High. As its name conveys, Boys High was a single-gender school. That autumn, I was a newly minted cheerleader excited for my first outing by school bus across Brooklyn. We got off the bus and entered the stadium, and lo and behold, there was a sea of Black faces in the stands. That's what I remember so vividly all these years later. Given my sheltered naïveté, I asked the teacher who had accompanied us, "Mr. S, where did all these Black people come from?" He replied, "The neighborhood we are in is called Bedford-Stuyvesant. Actually, Terry, I believe it is one of the largest Black communities in the country." I learned that its population was four times the size of the better-known Harlem in Manhattan, New York; indeed, it was the largest Black

community in the U.S. Those million Black people were so close geographically speaking, but so very far away from the bubble in which I had grown up. Brooklyn was almost as racially segregated—and to a lesser degree, religiously segregated—residentially as the Deep South (and with a few exceptions, remains substantially that way today).

I experienced another important cultural revelation that transformative autumn afternoon. I was curious as to how an all-boys high school would handle cheering. All the cheerleaders I knew in the co-ed Brooklyn High Schools were girls, and enviably so as dictated by the teen culture back then. But on that day during the first time out of the football game, there came a group of boys, all dressed in the same Boys High uniform, tumbling out onto the field, doing cartwheels, flips, and other fantastic gymnastic maneuvers set to rock music that was breathtaking! For the duration of the game, we girls stood in awe on the sidelines waving our pompoms, enthralled as we watched this stellar performance.

Why do I interpret that scene now as a cultural movement? It was because that community led by Black adolescent boys and young men was ahead of the times in 1957. The performance was truly groundbreaking and deserved our attention and admiration. Think of what cheerleading has become since then: a viable, competitive sport for young people in high schools and colleges across America. But reflecting back on that encounter, I now realize that what we were admiring was the creative, groundbreaking nature of that activity and is a reflection of what we hear today from many African American pundits as a critique of American life that America loves and appropriates Black culture but doesn't love Black people.

My coming of age in relation to racial awareness continued right after I returned from Jacksonville; whether that was coincidence or fate, I'll never know. I was asked to join a senior youth group comprised of selected students from all the high schools in Brooklyn, sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), one of the few organizations at the time devoted to "intergroup relations," as I later learned. Its goal was simple but profound: to bring together diverse groups of teens who lived in different neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Almost all the public schools had enrollment systems based purely on proximity, so you went to school in the neighborhood near where you lived; the few exceptions were the citywide specialized high schools. And because neighborhoods in Brooklyn (and in so many places in New York City and beyond) were segregated (and still are), there was little opportunity for social contact between Black and other students of color and white students. Private high schools, the parochial ones, were also segregated then by religion and, in some cases, by gender. NCCJ was one of the few organizations who organized these events in different urban areas at the time.

I learned so much from the Black students who attended those NCCJ meetings. I can recall us addressing stereotypes and prejudice as we learned about each other and told our personal stories in a safe space. I later realized as I pursued social work that this was a process of structured dialogue facilitation (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Through that program, I was exposed to insights into the private side of "the Black experience" from these students' unique perspectives—perspectives I may never have gained otherwise.

One particular conversation stands out to this day from those impactful NCCJ weekly sessions.

We were asked by the leader, "Are there any things that bother you about your own identity group, being Negro or Jewish?" (Those two groups were specifically named, and "Negro" was the term commonly used then.) Carolyn, one of the few Black students who attended, answered, "Yes. I am dark-skinned, and there is discrimination. The boys favor the lighter-skinned girls who are called 'high yellow,' and there are names for the other shades also. I can't tell even my friends how hurtful that is." (That cultural description, obviously personal and hurtful to Carolyn, is still used today in Black culture, I am told.)

Her candid admission allowed me to reveal an antisemitic[1] incident from the eighth grade that confused me four years later, which I revealed to the group. Tommy, my eighth-grade Italian "boyfriend," had given me a gold-plated heart necklace for Valentine's Day. I was so flattered, and then he asked me, with a puzzled look on his face, "Tell me, Terry. I heard you were Jewish, but I told the person who told me: 'That couldn't be true; she is so nice!'" I don't recall whether I thanked him or said anything other than "yes." The bottom line at the time, and for many years subsequently, is that I thought that was a compliment! I was glad to be different—to be an "exception" from what presumably were my peers', and no doubt their parents' and families', views of Jews.

That semester-long experience allowed me to focus on an understanding of antisemitism, historically and as it affected me personally, in addition to intra- and inter-minority conflicts. Because I had grown up for the first 10 years of my life in an all-Jewish neighborhood, I thought the world was Jewish. It wasn't until I moved to a largely Italian American neighborhood that I encountered antisemitism for the first time from my classmates, although I hadn't recognized what that was yet. I remembered during another NCCJ session that some students in the 8th grade used antisemitic slurs against our Jewish teacher, words that I had never heard before and didn't even know the meaning of then—such as the "K" word.

The following year I began college with a full scholarship to New York University (NYU), which took me by subway and elevated train into Manhattan. (Some of you may recall the end of the movie *Saturday Night Fever* when John Travolta's character leaves a provincial white working-class Brooklyn neighborhood where he lived for the cosmopolitan "City"—meaning Manhattan.) That's the way I felt as I was exposed for the first time to white, Jewish affluent students from assimilated families and realized that there were Jewish counterparts, and for that matter Italian/Christian young people, who did not come from working-class immigrant families.

The diversity of students opened my eyes to many facets of isolation and segregation. I met and interacted for the first time with a white male student named Sean who had cerebral palsy, walked with braces, and spoke with difficulty. I admit it was jarring at first when he stopped to talk to me in the student center, because there were no visibly disabled students that I recall in high school. Meeting him stimulated a vague memory, though. In a flashback, I remembered a

[1]Readers should note that even this term that usually means an expression or act of distain, discrimination or disrespect, has its complexities and challenges. There have been different spellings with different contexts and history: alternatively, Anti-Semitism verses Antisemitism (one word capitalized) or antisemitism (one word lower case if used in middle of the sentence). The Southern Poverty Law Center and the U.S. State Department now use antisemitism as one word so as not to imply that there is such a thing as "semite" or "semitism."

group of disabled (“handicapped” was the term used then) students with different visible signs of difference (such as Down’s syndrome, wheelchair usage, and other physical disabilities). They were completely segregated from the rest of my elementary school in a room next to the cafeteria, hidden away. No one ever explained who they were, let alone introduced us to them or had us interact with them. This was 20 or so years before the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibited discrimination based on mental or physical disability (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2020). As a post-script, Sean and I became part of the same social network, and I respected his ability to overcome extraordinary challenges. It still amazes me how prevalent ableism continues to be—and how people avoid or limit interaction with people who are differently abled.

There was one profound experience in college that raised and expanded my consciousness beyond the “-isms” to the concept of “privilege.” It falls under the heading of “conversations that I wish I had with a professor and fellow students that I never had.” It will reveal how complicit so many of us are in our own oppression and provides an example of “white male Christian privilege.” It is the Christian part that is particularly relevant here, as we are continuously reminded in the right-wing media especially that America is a Christian country usually presented in contrast to the politically liberal perspective that America is a multi-cultural society.

I took a course in “The History of Art” at NYU, a wonderful place to view art firsthand, taught by a famous white male Christian professor. When we came to the section on the syllabus titled “The Middle Ages,” my understanding of what was being presented faltered. I was confused and, quite frankly, feeling dumb. As the professor lectured and showed slides of famous paintings, I kept asking myself, “What am I missing?” Questions like: How could a woman be a virgin and still have been the mother of Jesus Christ? What was the ascension of Christ? Who were apostles? Who were Luke, Matthew, John? Why did “the Last Supper” keep using Judas as an adjective and a noun? What was the conversion of Paul about? So many so-called masterpieces depicted white angels and Jesus was portrayed as a white male. Most of the magnificent structures shown were cathedrals built by millions of peasants over decades. The professor was constantly quoting the “New Testament.”

Coming from a rather sheltered traditional Jewish upbringing, I had never even been in a church. Indeed, we were not allowed to go into one by my parents’ edicts. Besides, as my 8th grade Italian-Catholic friends once told me when I asked to join their Saturday night dances at St. Finbar’s church, “Sorry Terry, only Catholics are invited.” I never expressed to any of them how hurt I was.

I should have asked those and so many other questions to the professor. I should have asked him to give those of us who were not Christian a primer in the context and history of the beginning and growth of Christianity. (Indeed, the class was probably one-third to one-half Jewish, and we often joked among ourselves that NYU should be called “NY Jew.”) Still, everyone remained silent. I should have asked my fellow students: “Do you understand the meaning and symbolism of these paintings, sculptures, miniature icons? Are you feeling as ignorant as I am?”

I never did. I assumed that I was the only one. I felt isolated and ashamed. I passed the course by

memorizing the facts related to the art we were tested on. Those high school and college experiences, limited as they were, were profoundly formative for me and certainly impacted my beliefs, my subsequent reading, and pursuits toward social work graduate school. Ultimately, they guided my actions and choices in my professional and personal life.

As the 1960s evolved, I learned the difference in college and graduate school courses between terms like “de jure” and “de facto” segregation. The South, as I had seen in Jacksonville, was full of the former back then. Remnants of “Jim Crow” were still clearly visible beyond those water fountains I had seen years ago. And while the legal walls slowly began to fall in the South after the 1954 Supreme Court decision (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954) it took another decade of protests and policy advocacy before the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed under President Johnson, to be followed by the Voting Rights Act (1965) a year later. And that was just the beginning of a slow march toward addressing racial inequality that continues today!

Sadly, communities today are still as segregated as ever, in spite of housing rights and anti-redlining policies being signed into law under both the administrations of Presidents Johnson and Nixon. Attempts were made to desegregate public schools years later into the 1970s by rectifying geographic segregation through “busing” across neighborhoods. Unfortunately, this strategy was resisted all too often by much of society—Black and white—largely because of the violence and conflicts, and the unfairness it placed on working-class and poor white and Black communities. People in the more middle-class and affluent suburbs were largely spared of forced integration (NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, 1972).

In the Aftermath: 60 Years Later

So, fast-forward 60+ years later. Trump continued to stoke the fire of segregation within suburbs, and between suburbs and cities. We know that disparities and discrimination by race and gender still clearly exist on an individual and systemic basis. Yes, we’ve come a long way from the 1950s, although we still have such a long way to go.

And back to Jacksonville, 2020: How much progress has really been made in 60+ years? Look at one example of what happened in the midst of racial and social justice protests across the country: the demand for the removal of the Confederate flag and monuments from public spaces throughout the South. How should the following event be interpreted? Too little, too late, or another sign on the road to transformative change?

As protests in the aftermath of George Floyd’s fatal arrest continued, Jacksonville officials Tuesday quietly removed a statue of a Confederate soldier that stood for more than a century outside of its City Hall ahead of a protest in the city. Mayor Curry who in the past apparently had avoided taking a stance on the issue of such monuments indicated that other statues would soon be removed (Reid et al., 2020).

My response is that you do not have to choose. Yes, it’s been a long time coming and the statue is just one symbol of dark Civil War history. On the other hand, to use an expression that President Obama used to quote from the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. (which is where I first

heard it): "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" (CNW Network, 2018, para. 64).

The important point to be recognized here is that it took and takes social activism and activists, a social movement, perseverance, patience, and organizing to bend that arc. Some events along the way to removing those symbols were spontaneous, others were intentional strategies of change. It is a "both/and" approach. It is often called "seizing a window of opportunity." However, without having built an infrastructure, without organizations and without a strategy, there would be not enough people to climb through the window; both are needed to make transformative progressive change. The curve may zigzag, so we need to be steadfast in the struggle, and vow to be in it for the long haul.

Strategies of Influence

The lessons learned and solutions for those who are seeking their place and role in the quest for racial and social justice, presented here as part of this final section, are based on theory and practice; that is, they are based on my years of scholarship and experience as a scholar-advocate (Johnson, 1994; Mizrahi, 2022), and on the practical wisdom of other social workers (Pyles, 2021; Staples, 2016).

- We need people both inside and outside. We need informed, committed people at the table *and* at the door. We need people with integrity at the "top" in positions of authority on the inside *and* people at the "bottom" on the outside holding leaders accountable for their actions. [I will add now: We also need people at the polls! Voting is the first and foundational step of a democracy (University of Connecticut School of Social Work, 2021).]

- In building coalitions needed to influence policy, negotiation and compromise are not dirty words. There is much one could give up or postpone without violating one's basic values and principles. There are times to capitulate and times to resist, but most of our work will be in between one extreme and the other (Greenawalt et al., 2021).

- Be mindful of the "7 D's of Defense" identified by Lee Staples (2016) that are used by opponents and adversaries to stop progressive change: deflecting, dividing, delaying, deceiving, denying, discrediting, and destroying (in no particular order of priority). Always anticipate opposition to any significant change proposal, and plan to address it by building allies and supporters and not alienating adversaries unnecessarily and/or prematurely.

- Understand the difference between explaining and excusing behavior. Cultural humility includes understanding why a person or a group does something seemingly against your community's norms. It does not mean exonerating destructive behaviors, but it does mean respectfully acknowledging differences that exist with groups and communities. Sometimes it is enough to introduce

different norms, customs, laws, and procedures to people not familiar with or who have not come into contact with other cultures, even those from the same country. For those times, a harder line will have to be drawn as to what acceptable behavior is and what is not in your culture and in our society.

- Understand that stereotypes usually come from valid generations. That's why they are dangerous to use. Learn or teach the historical context as to where and when a stereotype first emerged. Be cautious of the slippery slope in depicting a group a certain way—and remember that not all stereotypes may be perceived as negative. Still, using them minimizes the rich diversity within a particular group or identity and objectifies them.

- Find a friend or colleague willing to be generous and answer your naïve questions, those things you always wanted to know but were afraid to ask about their background or identity.

One Solution of Many

One important solution in beginning to address racism and the other "-isms" is what the NCCJ provided me over 60 years ago on the intergroup level: facilitated structured dialogues (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Dialogue requires mutual respect, not easy in these times. As I've often heard said, *when emotions are high*, *cognition is low*. Remember there are two sides to a conversation: speaking and listening, and the latter may be more important than the former. Fostering a climate of tolerance and appreciation must be a foundation for this work, as difficult as those are to implement. Lots of people say they want listening and respectful dialogue, but it takes hard work, plus the willingness to take risks, make mistakes, and to forgive yours and theirs.

I learned from others and attempted at times myself to apply what was originally called *intergroup contact hypothesis*, described by Gordon Allport (1955) in the 1950s, to lessen prejudice. And now over a half-century later there is much evidence of its effectiveness if it is deliberately applied to different groups and structures. For example, a meta-analysis with 515 studies and more than 250,000 subjects demonstrated that intergroup contact did reduce both negative attitudes and behavior toward "others" (Pettigrew et al., 2011). The authors' research supported—as well as modified—Allport's original "Contact Theory," which was widely misunderstood and simplified as merely bringing different groups together. When it failed, it was because those promoting and attempting to implement it omitted or could not control for Allport's identified conditions for optimal contact: equal status among the individuals or groups, accentuating common goals and minimizing intergroup competition, and authority sanction, meaning support for the program and process by organizational, corporate, or government leadership.

Moreover, Pettigrew et al. (2011) posit that there are other positive outcomes of intergroup contact, such as greater trust and forgiveness for past transgressions. These contact effects occur not only for ethnic groups, but also for such other groups as the LBGTQ+ community, and people with disabilities or mental illness. Furthermore, the study's results show that effects

typically generalized beyond the immediate outgroup members in the situation to the whole outgroup, other situations, and even to other outgroups not involved in the contact. These results also appear to be universal—across nations, genders, and age groups. The major mediators of the effect are basically affective: reduced anxiety and empathy. And even indirect contact, Pettigrew et al. (2011) found, reduced prejudice such as vicarious contact through the mass media and having a friend who has an outgroup friend. This counters, at least to some degree, a perceived view that one can be racist while saying: "Some of my best friends are…."

These results are continuing to hold in new environments and circumstances. Harwood (2017) reports that indirect contact through social media can also increase positive attitudes and behavior towards other identity groups. He notes, counter-intuitively, that some evidence suggests that contact is most effective for people with higher levels of pre-existing prejudice. Yet, he also points out that contact can have some ironic negative effects on progress towards societal equity. In particular, considerable evidence suggests that harmonious intergroup contact can reduce perceptions of inequality and suppress the motivation for structural social change for dominant and subordinate groups. The question is whether that outcome is good or bad. You can guess my answer, that it is not "either/or." Perhaps, if a critical mass of people—particularly young people—are exposed and interact on real-life projects as well as contrived exercises (as was my experience with the NCCJ), the results may also positively affect organizational structures and systems—making change occur from the bottom up.

It seems like the best way to end this reflection is with a series of "truisms" (which are cliches that have merit): As others have pointed out, the journey is as important, perhaps more important than the destination as long as we have our compass with us to steer us in the right direction—keep our eyes on the prize.

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