



“Our Finest Hour” June 3, 2020

Thank goodness for sunshine. The okra, squash, corn, and green beans are growing like “nobody’s business” (anonymous, 19??).

Time for a story, actually a whole bunch of them condensed into a stream of consciousness-type of reflection. Know that a handful of folk don’t appreciate it when I get personal, but sometimes professionalism is guided by personal perspectives. So here goes:

“Black & White”

My granddad’s grandad fought in the Civil War in place of his father. He was at Wilson’s Creek, then Pea Ridge, then followed General Sherman throughout the entire campaign. He mustered in as a blacksmith and was discharged as a preacher. My family often quipped, “Andrew ‘got religion’ during the war.”

Our country fought a horrible Civil War over the issue of slavery. Southern historians tried to say it was about “state’s rights,” and northern politicians tried to say it was to “preserve the Union.” As a kid growing up, I was taught in American History classes the Civil War was about two different economies. The truth is the Civil War would never have occurred had it not been for the immoral, incomprehensible institution of slavery.

Also as a kid, I think I hated the South for what they did, i.e., enslaved Africans, treated them cruelly, and started a war to try to keep their “institution” in tact. In 1959 my mom put me on a Frisco train headed to Bessemer, Alabama, so I could live with my grandma and granddad for a few months while they were stationed there. Granddad was inspecting the wheels and axles on new boxcars forged not far from the Tower of Vulcan in nearby Birmingham. I learned years later Granddad had made brass knuckles to protect himself from Klansmen who did not like him eating lunch with a friend of his who happened to be Black.

A few years later and back in North Springfield, I watched on black and white RCA television as Civil Rights and Viet Nam protesters in the 1960s were knocked to the ground with clubs and water from high powered fire hoses. I watched Watts burn. I watched soldiers die. I watched Peter, Paul, and Mary sing Bob Dylan songs. After the Beatles were on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1964, I washed the Butch Wax out of my hair and let it grow. Sometime between fourth grade and junior high, I bought plaid bellbottoms and wore tie-died t-shirts. Later, I collected all those period photographs and burned them.

Fifty years later and the Rip Van Winkle in me emerges. I awakened to a pandemic world complicated by ignorance and hatred. Am immediately reminded of the first rule in problem-solving, i.e., to find the

cause. In this case the cause is an unhealthy ignorance created scores if not hundreds of years ago that has not yet been defeated.

Those of us who have chosen to work in higher education to help develop educated persons must certainly know that ours is a moral enterprise. Creating “citizen” teachers, “citizen counselors”, “citizen” school leaders, “citizen” child and family development experts, and “citizen” child life specialists is not only our mission; it is our passion.

Similar to my great, great grandfather, I “got religion,” too – not as a soldier in a war but as an educator. Between 2008 and 2012, I accepted the task of evaluating a federally-funded Character Education grant in Alabama after Hurricane Katrina displaced thousands of families from New Orleans to Baldwin County, an area in the Deep South east of Mobile Bay and west of the Florida panhandle. In short, I learned that ignorance CAN be defeated. I saw Black and White children learning in the same schools, not some in “advantaged” schools and others in “disadvantaged” schools. From my California years (another long story) I expected to see the “good” schools in the “good” neighborhoods and the “bad” schools in the “bad” neighborhoods. How ironic to see social justice working where I least expected it and not see it years earlier where I thought it would be.

Children must be taught how not to hate things or places or people. Except for ticks and chiggers, I saw first-hand how education can defeat ignorance and thereby defeat hatred. Hate is an emotion born out of ignorance. When we overcome ignorance, we overcome hatred. Point in fact: I have every Alabama Crimson Tide championship ball cap since Julio Jones, and I’ve read everything Rick Bragg has ever written. George Wallace was ignorant. I stood at that very door in Tuscaloosa just to try to imagine it. (Rick is now a Crimson Tide clinical faculty member, btw. I think he “got religion,” too.)

At the expense of gross oversimplification, let’s teach our students how to overcome hatred by defeating ignorance. Let’s do so as we teach whatever our content expertise might be. Some subjects naturally lend themselves to this, but all subjects, all learnings, are inextricably interconnected, so there are no exceptions.

Please join me in standing up for what is right and just. The College of Education should be a leader in social justice. We should be, we can be, and I think in many ways we are. But we can do more. So, let’s do it. Stand up.

I appreciate each and every one of you so very much. It’s a privilege to be a Bear, so let’s be socially just Bears, so the next generation of world citizens can build bright futures.

David