

We're all the same!

Opinion

After my stint in the full body cast, I was always eager to keep busy and energetically do whatever requested. Sometime at 8 years old, I was to help destroy the dilapidated chicken house on the farm. It was a small rectangular house with a V shape roof in which a grown person could walk down the center aisle, on each side of which were rows of 18 inch cubicles in which chickens built nests and roosted. Home to chickens for about 40 years, it was a mess although all of us kids loved to collect eggs whether the hens were in their nests or not. For reasons unknown to me, it was time to tear the chicken house down.

In charge of doing this was Herschel -- a huge Negro man whom I had known forever as being a preferred helper for my father in many projects on the farm, around the house, and wherever my father had construction work to do. Herschel was a reliable worker, slow talking, gentle, very pleasant, and always had shoes with tops of the toes cut out because his toes always hurt. Herschel would put me to work doing whatever and obviously overseeing so I would not get hurt as well as follow through appropriately in whatever was expected.

We first emptied the chicken house by taking out all the nests and dismantling the cubicles piling everything about 10 feet from the house so that it could be burned -- something routinely done with trash, leaves and any other disposable items. So Herschel sets the pile afire and we proceed to tear off the roof. I climbed a ladder and followed instructions to pry off shingles with a hammer and throw them so that Herschel could put them on the fire. The plan was to dismantle top down, burning it all the while until the chicken house was gone.

So, I am ripping off shingles the best I can with a claw hammer, but the world is turning dark because pitch black smoke from the fire is billowing up to where I was working. After many minutes of this, Herschel is on the ladder extending his arm over to me saying, "Sammy, you keep in that smoke like that and you will be as black as I am."

That sort of shocked me because in my hyperactive superficial rev'd up childhood, I usually did not notice things like color, size, or other categories except whether I was moving or not. So, I put my arm along side Herschel's arm which he had extended to help life me off the roof. I stared mutely at the differences in our skin colors. I said nothing but just looked at Herschel who was all the while looking at me with a big toothy grin. He helped me down the ladder and after the pile burned down, I went back on the roof to finish the job. That night at dinner, I told the story asking "Why didn't someone tell Herschel to get out of the smoke when he was a kid?" My father

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looked up and with a slight smile, he firmly slapped his hand down on the table saying "We are all the same... we are all the same," in a firm manner and in his well recognized, no-nonsense "you better believe me" mode.

Later that year, again, at the dinner table, my sister, Anna Marie, one year older than me, spoke up about what she had heard on the playground that day. "Some of the kids say that Jews do bad things to people." With that, my father, this time forcefully loud and banging his hand on the table each time as he said it, louder each time, "We are all the same! We are all the same! WE ARE ALL THE SAME!"

And that was it. No further conversation was necessary, expected, desired or allowed. If he said so, it had to be. I was privileged to have a father who had an innate transcendental oneness and gave us all a glimpse of how things ought to be and really are.

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