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# Social Justice Autobiography

Levester Loggins

Levester J. Loggins, “Social Justice Autobiography”

My name is Levester J. Loggins #151387. As a young bright-eyed child, I was extremely proud of my family lineage. Just knowing I had something no other kid in my neighborhood had made me feel good inside. I had a grandfather, Jim, who was born in 1900, and I had a father, Elmer, who was born in 1928. They were born in Hayti, a small town in southeastern Missouri.

Not only that, the early 1900s had a significant and special meaning to me. As a child visiting my grandparents’ home, I was completely amazed by the amount of farmland they owned. As I looked across their fields, I could not see another house for what appeared to be miles. At that time, I was too young to know or understand anything about sharecropping.

From the 1500s through the 1900s, whites in America enacted various laws that legalized the brutal, violent, and barbaric treatment of Black men, women, and children. I used to sit at my kitchen table, lie on the living room floor, or curl up in my bed listening intently to my parents or grandparents telling me endless stories about their parents and their childhood and what it was like growing up in the era of Jim C*r*owism.

I would learn later that after slavery was abolished, the early 1900s became an era in which Blacks were not entitled to justice of any kind. As best as I could remember, there were no such stories during my childhood. Neither my parents nor grandparents told me stories about the deaths of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Marcus M. Garvey, or Emmett Till, or about Black Wall Street or the Klu Klux Klan. Nor did they tell me stories about the treatment they or their parents received at the hands of white people prior to and after the Jim Crow laws took effect.

In fact, my parents and grandparents did everything they could to shield me from the racism and discrimination that existed in America. But the reality was it would have been wonderful to hear their firsthand accounts of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and how they felt about it. Did they agree with King's message and vision for Black survival? More importantly, did they agree with King's "I Have a Dream" speech? How did they feel about Malcolm X and his message for the Black people living in America?

Admittedly, during the early part of America's history, white people staunchly defended their segregationist policies. The policies they enacted meant that Black people could not drink from the same water fountains they drank from. Blacks could not eat at the same restaurants with them. Blacks could not go to school with them. And Blacks could not look at white women.

Even when Blacks formed their own communities and businesses in Tulsa, Oklahoma, white people went in and killed hundreds of innocent black people and burned down their communities [in the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921]. To this date, no prosecutor has investigated the incident, and no one has ever been arrested and charged for that horrific incident. This ruthless treatment of Blacks occurred in America despite the words in the Constitution’s preamble saying, "All men are created equal."

As a kindergartener in 1967, I was enrolled at Clark Branch No. 1, a school just two blocks from where I lived. Despite living in a Black neighborhood, I don't remember if Clark Branch No. 1 was an all-Black school. I definitely don't remember any white children being in my classroom.

After a car accident, my parents moved to a house on the northside of St. Louis, which was deeper in the Black community. While white people did live in our new neighborhood at first, I noticed that they started moving out.

In 1969, I was enrolled as a first grader at Wallbridge Elementary school. Even then, I don't remember if my new school was an all-Black school or if white children went there. But even if they did attend, I believed that the color of a person's skin didn't matter.

By 1970, however, a new reality would flip my world upside down. Apparently, prior to the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., racial tensions and strife between Blacks and whites were roaring in America. Discrimination and racial injustice were at their highest point. Legal battles for social justice were being waged around the United States.

The NAACP was very instrumental in fighting for social justice reforms. The legal battle the NAACP waged in response to Rosa Parks' arrest after her refusal to give up her bus seat to a white woman was just one of the many legal battles fought by that organization in an attempt to enact social justice reforms. The appointment of Justice Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court further paved the way for the NAACP to argue the illegality of school segregation policies.

At the time, I didn't know anything about the legal battles being fought and won in the courts across America seeking to overturn the country's racist and segregationist policies. My parents never had those conversations with me.

However, in 1970, after I completed first grade, my parents told me that I would no longer be allowed to go to Wallbridge. They said that I would be bused across town to attend a white school on the city's south side. As a young child, that made absolutely no sense to me, especially when there was a school in my neighborhood. Besides, a school was supposed to be a school regardless of where it was located. I didn't know at the time that some schools (white) were better equipped than other (Black) schools.

I can't say that I was too happy about having to ride a bus across town just to go to school. But being young, I had to obey my parents. Gratiot Elementary was the first white school I was enrolled in. I completed the second through fifth grade at that school. Wade, a magnet school, was the next white school I was enrolled in. I completed the sixth through eighth grades there. After graduating from Wade, I was enrolled in O'Fallon Tech, another magnet school, where I *w*ould do shop work the first half of the day and attend school the second half of the day.

While I was enrolled in white schools, I did the same thing that my parents did. I closed my eyes so I couldn't see any racial or social injustice of any kind. My parents never took the time to tell me about the incident in which the National Guard was called in to prevent a Black student from attending an all-white school.

Being bused to all-white schools had many memorable benefits. At Gratiot in 1972, I met and fell in love with a young white girl named Christine. I was ten years old at the time. Little did I know that seventeen *y*ears earlier, in 1955, Emmett Till was brutally murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman. But I didn't know about that incident. It definitely wasn't taught in school. So Christine remained the object of my desire from 1972 to 1981, the year both of us graduated from O'Fallon Tech.

When I was young, I did not believe that racial and social injustice existed, and people were lying if they said otherwise. Racial injustice did not exist in 1982, when a St. Louis police officer impregnated Laura, a 13-year-old girl, and ended up killing another young girl in an attempt to kill Laura. The policeman wanted to keep Laura from telling her parents that he got her pregnant. But, despite

the protest that occurred right after the killing of that innocent girl, I did not see any social injustice in what had happened. To me, killing that innocent girl was just a freak accident. I concluded that had she not been sitting on her front porch, she never would have been killed.

I actually wasn't exposed to the idea of social justice until long after I was in prison. Prior to coming to prison, I totally believed in the American ideology that "All men are created equal," and that under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment no one should be deprived of "life, liberty or property without due process of law." Those were the things I was taught in those white schools and I believed in them.

Since the late seventies and early eighties, however, there was so much injustice going on in and around African American communities that I often found myself crying. Crying because there was nothing I could do about it. Crying because deep down inside I knew something had to be done to correct injustice of any kind. The police beating of Rodney King was shocking, but what was even more shocking was an all-white jury finding the white officers not guilty. The verdict was just a confirmation that white people don't see Black people as being equal. Therefore, they will continue to protect their own even to the detriment of the rights of others.

Even if there were racial issues or social injustices going on in America, I believed for a long time that the enactment of various social justice initiatives and reforms meant that America had outgrown its racist and prejudicial treatment of the people it recognized as fifth-class citizens. However, despite the strides America has made and continues to make in social justice reforms, the events surrounding the 2020 presidential election and the January 6th insurrection only reaffirm that racism, prejudice, and social injustice are alive and well in America.

What kind of social reforms were made in response to the killing of Emmett Till? To the Birmingham, Alabama, Church bombing in which four Black children were killed? To the killing of Trayvon Martin? I am reminded of what the late Malcolm X said: "Black people don't need civil rights, they need human rights." Malcolm X reminded us that civil rights can be stripped away at any time. Just look at the current debate over affirmative action.

Social justice can never be accomplished if America continues to take four steps forward and one hundred steps backwards. As I see it, every effort must be made, even by us prisoners, to ensure that equal social and economic justice is given to everyone. To commit crimes and warehouse ourselves in America's prisons, then cry about social injustice, is counterproductive to the efforts of those on the front line fighting for meaningful social justice reform. History shows that the small steps towards progress result in giant steps being etched into the annals of history.

Genre: Essay

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