After Sins of the Fathers, Steps toward Reconciliation

By Lynn Goswick

My best friend in eighth grade was DJ, a smart, funny Catholic who had lived abroad while her parents were stationed in Germany. To a Southern Baptist who hadn't yet ventured far from her small North Carolina town, DJ was worldly and fascinating.

When I asked my parents if DJ could spend the night one Friday, the answer was no. I was surprised—usually having friends over wasn't a problem. My parents had met DJ and liked her, but she wasn't allowed to stay because DJ was black. Having her stay overnight might invite trouble from certain people in town.

It made no sense to me, on many levels. My education began years after schools were integrated, so in my mind, there was no difference between us, and the prejudices were silly. How could someone like DJ, who was so much smarter, even wiser, than I was, be considered inferior? Also, why did my parents care what others thought? Was it possible we could be in danger?

That year, as I became more aware of how my family, friends, and acquaintances in town spoke about race, I realized how important it was, even in the small moments, to refute the idea that color determined worth. It was my way of encouraging others to be more open to those who were different, and, in a small way, make it right to folks who were treated badly because of their skin.

In September, I attended a symposium organized by Trinity Wall Street parishioner J. Chester Johnson in which Johnson demonstrated that reconciliation—making it right—begins with the simple act of apology.

Over the last six years, Johnson has walked an uncomfortable path of learning how his own beloved grandfather, Lonnie, was once involved in an event that led to the deaths of more than 100 people.

In 2008, Johnson wrote the litany of offense and apology for the Service of Repentance, part of a two-day observance in which the Episcopal Church formally apologized for its role in the sin of transatlantic slavery. Although he grew up in the Deep South before the Civil Rights Movement, Johnson didn't share the often-prevalent racism that characterized the region.

While drafting the litany, he poured over the writings of W.E.B. Dubois, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and other African-American writers. Johnson was startled to discover a small book by Ida B. Wells-Barnett about the Elaine Race Massacre, an event in September 1919 in which scores of African-American sharecroppers were hunted down and killed by local whites and federal soldiers.

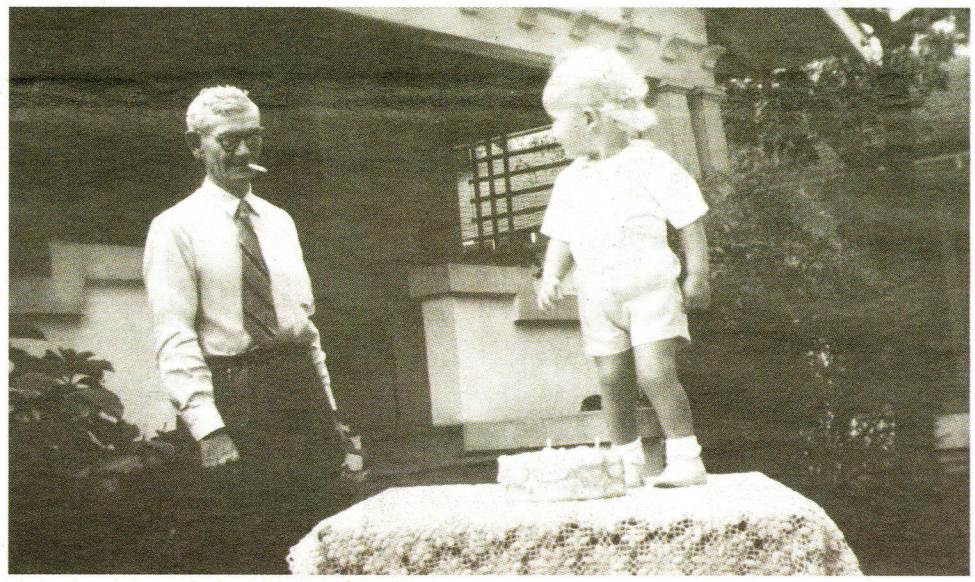
Elaine, Johnson realized, was only 60 miles from where he had grown up in Arkansas, but he had never heard of the event. Former high school classmates had never heard of it, either. But after thinking through more of his mother's stories about her father and reading *On the Laps of Gods*, an account of the event by Robert Whitaker, Johnson concluded that his beloved grandfather, Lonnie, indeed had been involved.

Although "Elaine" occurred decades before Johnson was born, he has not been able to reconcile for himself the loving grandfather who picked him up when he fell and acted as playmate and confidant.

But through the symposium, and private meetings beforehand, Johnson has been able to acknowledge his family's involvement in the event, and apologize to the descendants of those arrested and convicted unjustly.

Sheila Walker, a grandniece of two African-American sharecroppers shot during the massacre but arrested afterwards, one of whom was sentenced to death but whose execution was denied by a U.S. Supreme Court decision, was present at the symposium, along with Whitaker, and David Solomon, a native of the Elaine area who is working to place a monument in the county seat so the nearly 100-year-old event is not forgotten.

Chester Johnson and Sheila Walter at the Trinity Wall Street symposium. Photo: Leah Reddy



Chester Johnson and his grandfather. Photo Courtesy of Chester Johnson.

Walker remembered her first meeting with Johnson, and how his willingness to admit his grandfather had been part of the massacre encouraged her to be open to the meeting and to conversation.

"Here's a person trying to reconcile the bad in their history," she said.

And Walker, who didn't know Johnson's grandfather, is more forgiving of Lonnie than even Johnson.

"People aren't bad," she said. "Circumstances make people do bad things."

In the years since I've moved away from home, I've grown to understand my parents' decisions better. They came from a different time, and they knew things about our town that I didn't.

I don't know if I would make their choice, but I don't know that I wouldn't.

Johnson referred to philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's view that each generation has to experience and learn its most human essence for itself.

Toward the end of his remarks at the symposium, Johnson said, "we alone open up ourselves to the genuinely human—that is what we can do, that is our grace, as humans; otherwise, we are continually plagued by that eternal 'no'…which we sometimes call 'evil' or 'sin,' …of which racism is an elemental part."

Goswick is Project Manager and Associate Editor at Trinity Wall Street.