

The Talk

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I remember the image clearly, over 50 years ago, Emmitt Till's mother shocked the world with an open casket so that everyone would know what was done to her 14-year-old son. It was a symbolic act of truth to expose America to the brutal and savage reality of racism. When I was asked to share a personal story about race in America, I found it hard to choose. Do I talk about community insecurities, economics, employment, healthcare, education, law enforcement, or criminal justice just to name a few?

I am a child of Boston as well as a small town in Massachusetts. So I chose to share with you a story that combines my background and experience. I call this story "The Talk". Watching all the news recently triggered a flashback about my brother, who is now 73 years old. I don't know if my parents ever had "The Talk" with him. In my day, "The Talk" was the undercurrent to your daily upbringing as your parents tried to teach you how to survive.

I was 9-years old when we left Boston, leaving behind a neighborhood threatened by Urban Renewal. Moving to a small rural town with a population of 6,000, we increased the number of black families to four. Life was good on our 18 acres of land. In addition to a garden, we had chickens, cows, bulls, pigs, and even a pet goat. We were city kids so we made friends out of all the animals; not that we needed them because we made plenty of friends in the neighborhood. Other than my parent's divorce, I would say our life in the country was pretty uneventful. And then I had my flashback.

My brother, probably 16-years old at that time, was returning home from his part-time job at the local college in his old jalopy. It was around dusk. As he was nearing his destination, he passed a car that made a sharp U-turn and began to follow him down the road. It was just a plain old family sedan. My brother noticed a flashing light in the interior of the vehicle. Approaching home, he turned into our private roadway and noticed that the car continued to follow him.

Suddenly, a shot rang out, the sound piercing through the quiet country air. Almost instinctively, my mother heard it and ran outside accompanied by my father. There he was, our neighbor, a quasi-police officer stopped on our roadway in his personal vehicle. At this point, all you could see of my brother was the backend of his jalopy moving on down the road.

My parents approached this man to find out what had happened. He explained that my brother was driving with an expired inspection sticker. He followed him, trying to pull him over. Instead, my brother continued on, turning into our roadway. At this point, both my brother and the neighbor, who lived diagonally across the street, knew that they were on a dead-end private path that led to our back acreage.

I fired a warning shot over his head, the neighbor explained. My mother, who had lost an older brother to a lynching in Florida and my father, who was raised in the brutal oppression of racism in South Carolina, were both furious. I watched curiously as they processed a tsunami of feelings and emotions. This was a small town, with little or no budget, so they used quasi-police to supplement their two (2) full-time personnel. Please do not report this, our neighbor said to my parents.

I had never seen my parents hesitate to do what they thought was best for their children. But this time was different. I knew they wanted to confront this man, but he was a police officer, even if he was quasi, they needed to tread lightly.

Hard to imagine, tread lightly when someone has just shot at your son on your own property. Tread lightly because this person is a representative of the law. Tread lightly because the person with the gun is a white man. Tread lightly because you are Black. Those were the lessons that I learned that day.

I can't tell you what happened next because I don't remember. What I do remember is that my brother left this small town as soon as he turned of age. Yesterday, I had "The Talk" with my brother and learned a whole lot more.