

2

FOOT SOLDIER

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though I trusted my parents' judgment. But I was always sure of one thing. I knew down to the core of my being that what we were doing was right in the sight of God.

Until my school years, most of us didn't give much thought to hopes for racial justice. For years we had heard the grownups talking "hush talk" under their breath. We all cheered aloud with our parents as we listened to Martin Luther King Jr. make his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, but his marches seemed so far away.

Though most of the people in the country were shocked to see the Alabama police turn their dogs and water hoses loose on school-age children, we were not. We understood Southern justice. We had seen the evening news reports and could almost smell the smoke from Watts and Chicago. But we lived in Mississippi, "the Closed Society." Things would never change here. Still, something was in the air. All the teachers were talking about it, and I could see the fear and anger in their faces.

Harper Vocational High School ("Hapa High" to us) had an enrollment of about 750 students in grades one through twelve. It lay just across the railroad tracks in the "colored" section of the town of Mendenhall, Mississippi. The entire student body and all of the faculty were black. This was small-town Mississippi in 1966.

Some of the children in my seventh-grade homeroom cheered aloud and most nodded in agreement as Mr. Jackson, our teacher, voiced the sentiments of most of the teachers, who found the new talk of school desegregation frightening. After all, reorganization might threaten their job security. "Who do they think wants to go to school with them of peckerwoods anyway?" barked Mr. Jackson angrily, using one of our most derogatory terms for white folks. "I know I don't want to have anything to do with them." A couple of the more vocal kids added their "me neithers," summing up the attitude of most of the black people in Mississippi's school system.

For most of the kids, nodding in agreement with Mr. Jackson came easily. But not for me. I knew my father. He took his Christianity more seriously than most. He had left Mississippi in the late 1940s after his

The wide-ranging social and spiritual problem of race has touched our individual lives in different ways. Chris and I dedicate much of this book to sharing our personal stories. We do this to show that the process of reconciliation must be made personal. For it is only when we feel a friend's pain by making "his" problem "our" problem that we will harness the necessary passion to act.

As a black child growing up during the sixties, I was shaped by two powerful influences. First, I am the product of two strong Christian parents who taught me and demonstrated their faith to me and everyone around them daily. Second, I am a child of race. Next to Christianity, issues of integration, voting, racism, segregation and "white folks" were the things most talked about in my house and my neighborhood.

Sadly enough, this is the case for most black people of my generation. Race has shaped who we are and never seems to be too far removed from any situation. Yet it was precisely because of our strong Christian beliefs that my family took the point position in the battle for racial justice in our town.

As a child, I did not understand everything that was going on, even

brother was killed by a white law-enforcement officer. But he'd returned with his family thirteen years later as a missionary, determined to make a difference in the lives of his people who, he said, "were trapped by sin, poverty and racism."

Instead of making him content, his Bible taught him (and he taught us) to be concerned not only about people's souls but also about justice for them. He had already been kicked out of a local church for trying to motivate the people to do something about their situation. Now he was the pastor of a small church he had founded, and he and my mother worked tirelessly with the youth in the area through Bible classes that were held three nights a week. They called it Voice of Calvary Bible Institute.

As I sat quietly in Mr. Jackson's classroom, I realized that if something radical was going to happen, my family would surely be squarely in the middle of it.

Up until that point, the racial battle had mostly consisted of talk of what was going on in other parts of the country. It hadn't really affected my life in a personal way. But as I look back now and remember that day in Mr. Jackson's room, I'm aware that it was the beginning of a personal journey of trying to make sense out of the separation that existed between blacks and whites. For the next several years, I would try to reconcile this separation with what my parents had taught me about Christianity.

In the spring of 1966, Mississippi began to yield to the pressure to comply with the nation's twelve-year-old school desegregation laws. But wholesale school integration wouldn't come for another four years. Instead, Mississippi opted for an ingenious plan called Freedom of Choice. This plan made it legal for any of Mississippi's school-age children to enroll in the school of their choice in their town or city.

As far back as anyone could remember, everybody in Mississippi had gone to either a black school or a white school. Now, in the fall of 1966, each family was "free" to make their own choice. Theoretically, any white parents could now send their children to a black school, while the black parents who were brave enough could send their children to a white school. But those of us who lived in Mississippi knew "Freedom of Choice"

was an attempt not to integrate the schools, but only to alleviate pressure from the outside world to do something about separate-and-unequal school systems.

As I said, I had given all this racial mess very little thought. I was content to live in the "colored quarters" (a term that harked back to slavery, when blacks lived in "slave quarters"). I was content, like most of my thirteen-year-old peers, to attend an all-black school. The white school uptown might as well have been on another planet as far as we were concerned. Sure, I was aware of the separation of the races, but I thought that was the way it was supposed to be.

But now, with the civil rights movement in full swing, I understood that we were actually second-class citizens and that God did not intend for it to be this way. And now—with my father's bold response to Mississippi's "Freedom of Choice"—I was willing to be one of the ones to do something about it. But why? Why did our family always have to be the ones to shoulder the responsibility? Why did we five school-age Perkinses have to take the brunt of white anger and black resentment? My father always summed it up in one word: *leadership*.

My father's response to "Freedom of Choice" was to send his children to Mendenhall's all-white school. This decision resulted in a nightmare of physical and emotional cruelty, a nightmare that scared my whole family and left some of us cold and unforgiving. Only after ten years did I talk about the experience with my closest friends.

First Contact

I would love to say that all five of the school-age Perkinses—Joanie, Phillip, Derek, Deborah and me, the oldest—were unafraid on the first day of the new school year of 1966. I would love to say that we were poised and ready for battle. The makeshift Freedom School we attended that summer had tried to equip us for what we were about to experience, but there was no way it could totally prepare us.

Given that bravery is not the absence of fear but acting in the face of fear, I'll have to settle for saying that we were very brave soldiers. It was

the most fearful first day of school I've ever had. And this fear was not a one-time thing. It went on for most of the first year, and even into the second. This would be my first up-close-and-personal look at white people, and you know what they say about first impressions—they're lasting.

Each day after school for months, I would compare the day's experiences with my brothers and sisters. We concluded that the severity of the cruelty varied according to our age groups, but overall our experiences were very similar. On one level we felt sorry for the white kids, because we were pretty sure they were all going to hell for the way they treated us. But on the other hand we hated them and would probably have felt little remorse if the earth had opened up and swallowed them all.

I'm not saying that all the white kids participated in our constant harassment, but it might as well have been all of them. No one, not even the teachers, lifted a finger to make our existence at that school any easier.

One day while the teacher was out of the room, my desk became the target of innumerable wet paper bullets from rubber-band pistols. In my own opinion, I had become a model of Martin Luther King's nonviolent restraint, never striking back even when the paper bullets found their mark and the entire class cheered with delight. I had learned to ignore or sometimes even make fun of such harassment: "Hope y'all are having fun," I'd say, or "Glad I can entertain y'all." Most of the time I would keep a straight face and my mouth shut.

This day was a little different—not because the children did anything different, but because the teacher did not ignore their behavior. When he returned to the classroom, the evidence was irrefutable: dozens of paper bullets and rubber bands were strewn across the floor, all in the neighborhood of my desk. For some reason, this time it made the teacher angry. He had me point out all the boys who were involved. This I did with the naive notion that finally justice would be forthcoming. For me, this was to be a major victory; finally my existence in this hellhole would be a little more bearable. My fellow students could no longer torture me without consequences.

Before we reached the principals' office, I could see that I was taking

this a little more seriously than my seven tormentors were. The principal, who was also a pastor, was one of the few people in the school I had considered somewhat sympathetic to me. I could tell he truly wanted to correct the situation. His first question to the boys was very short: "Why?"

I will never forget the puzzled look on the white boys' faces as they marveled that he, a white man, had asked such a stupid question. *What's the big deal, anyway?* One boy's response to the principal's question etched a wound in my soul that today, sometimes, still bleeds. His blue eyes twinkling with impatience, he pushed his blond hair out of his eyes and said in his immature Southern drawl, "He's just a nigger!"

The principal was stunned. He didn't know how to respond. I had lost another round.

Why did this cut me so deeply? I was used to being called "nigger" several dozen times every day. It was years before I understood what had happened to me that day. This was racism at its worst. For a thirteen-year-old black boy to realize that the highest authority in his daily world would not give him justice—even in the face of overwhelming evidence, including proud confessions from the perpetrators—was a devastating blow to his fragile self-worth. The principal's failure to convince the boys that they had committed any crime at all, along with his unwillingness to discipline them, painfully dashed my hopes of ever finding justice within a racist institution.

Paying the Price

Although the civil rights movement was underway in Mississippi, things were changing very slowly—at least from our perspective. A handful of blacks were now in the white schools and having every minute of it, and blacks were being registered to vote all over the state. In our county, my father and his civil rights comrades decisively influenced the outcome of one of the powerful supervisors' elections. I will never forget how hard they worked to get him elected, and how proud they were when he won.

I never did understand why it was so important. The only white people we trusted were from the North, and this man was a Southerner. But my