

WHY DO I WRITE: "It bees like that ..."

I have never taken a formal course in self-defense. Mine has come by virtue of older boys in my neighborhood throwing punches, slapping, striking at will, challenging you to slow down the blows, "move your feet", screaming, "don't be afraid." Converting the basketball court into sessions on self-defense, bringing gloves sometimes, taking the mysteries away, tantamount to lessons on life; watching, screaming, yelling – always yelling – until all the senses were engaged. Catching blows before they landed; counter-punching, moving away, suddenly hearing different words, "good, good, good..." Why did he ... they ..., take the time? I don't know. Their lessons were welcomed, applied in both physical and non-physical confrontations, lessons never forgotten.

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"Anthony ... you're still around...?"

"Yes, sir..."

Words spoken, in a typical southern manner, not atypical, said as if genuinely surprised, without any hint whether the words possessed a double meaning; saying one thing, meaning another. Common greeting indeed was his, was mine - in a PRN sort of way - as needed. Possessing obvious and not so obvious meanings, cloaked symbols, embedded within history's clutches, coexisting inside the same southern milieu. An interaction similar to a cow's cud – there, not there, buried, not buried, turning in place, returning to be re-chewed prior to swallowing, again.

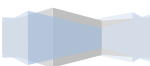
Thinking of other matters prior to entering the store, worrying, self-absorbed, wondering whether this new lifestyle was a mistake – from heat to manufactured air – holding onto a sample



screw and washer, prior to his words being extended, permitting me to revisit history's tales. "Anthony ... you're still around...?" Invading words, spoken within the confines of ones' social graces' space; not touching, he not me, me not him. Neither hand was extended, only words. Looking up, never deviating his glaze. A stare, sans any smile, a look I have seen before. Looking under and about, watching for a reaction, searching for a crack in the brown veneer.

Me staring over and around, seeing the reaction of others, both cashiers froze - in place - turning ears in our direction, similar to satellite dishes reaching out, receiving and emitting signals - without interference - even though they were positioned in a southwesterly direction, not due south, contrary to the instructions contained in the assembly manual. At full attention – they were – they stood. Ceasing activities, refusing to cloak their small town curiosity, flat-out nosey – now fully engaged. Curiosity has never killed the cat in Galveston, never has, never will. Staring, standing at attention, embedded much like the marine life on the hulls of passing ships.

I walked the two blocks to the hardware store to buy a couple of bolts and washers. The intent was to spend a small sum of money, not to exceed \$2.00. I had \$4.32 in my pocket. The unexpected attention, by the cashiers, made me feel I was the most important person in the store. In the past they have spoken when I entered the store, never fully engaged. Heads down, always appeared to be busy doing something else, never fully welcoming. Their past interaction with me was not like the persistent feeling of entering white stores in the age of southern apartheid, or during the post-apartheid period. Looking, searching, whispering unwelcomed words; never fully a whisper, causing the words to float over and out, so that we (Negroes) could hear; damn the change in the law, making sure the unwanted customers understood. Up, down, aisle to aisle, following us throughout the store; activity which helped to form my distorted views



of the world. Their - the cashiers' previous behavior- was different; unwelcoming, small-town entitled behavior, the way one possible treats a total stranger, little to do with race.

Writing in hindsight, ours was a Roy Moore moment, engaged in a history not worth repeating. During a question and answer session during his, Roy Moore's, senatorial campaign, on September 17, 2017, the candidate was asked when he thought America was last great. [Moore responded](#), "I think it was great at the time when families were united – even though we had slavery – they cared for one another ... Our families were strong, our country had a direction." His comments weren't a minor note in history. They were a comment on history; saying what he had to say, seeking an opportune time to impose an assumed superiority, forever wishing to turn time back, to return us to the days of glory. My interlocutor – it seems to me – was celebrating this history; telling on his and others' behavior during the thirty seven years which preceded our unexpected interaction; putting me in my place.

He was a long-time, practicing lawyer now in retirement – perhaps semi-retirement - close to twenty, twenty-five years my senior, an off-and-on member of the State Bar's grievance apparatus. Expressing words with certitude, a cocksure smugness, causing a different type of flood waters to appear, memories previously stored beneath the surface, much like an underground reservoir.

Every interaction can carry with it a multitude of interpretations. Successfully surviving is oft-times dependent upon how we interpret each interaction. Listening, making assessments, responding, acting, not acting - decisions based on past experiences, life circumstances, fate. At a different time, when surrounded by a group of black guys this point was wonderfully demonstrated. I spoke first, instructing, issuing a demand, directed at one of the men, saying what he was going to do; a demand hidden within a joke. Receiving an immediate response from



one of them, “Nobody’s afraid of you. You ain’t no damn lawyer anymore. We will whoop your ass!” I laughed. They laughed. Everybody laughed. We immediately recognized the humor, the use of words, bonding over life’s circumstances, engaging in the tit-for-tat, a linguistic push-pull, common in Black English. Dr. Geneva Smitherman explained in her writing, what we did, what we said, why we immediately laughed:

In a nutshell: Black [d]ialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America’s linguistic cultural African heritage and the condition of servitude, oppression and life in America. Black [l]anguage is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone and gesture. The Black [i]diom is used by 80 to 90 percent of American Blacks, at least some of the time. It has allowed Blacks to create a culture of survival in an alien land and as a by-product, has served to enrich the language of all Americans.

Talking and Testifying: The Language of Black America, Geneva Smitherman, Houghton Mifflin Company. 1977.



Hurricane Harvey made landfall on the Texas Gulf Coast on August 25, 2017. The visit to the hardware store came days after Harvey ceased his impressive display; blowing, sweeping, depositing water in unimaginable places and in previously unforeseen dimensions – unforeseen and unpredicted - even though the weather persons told us to the contrary. Scanning over his reddened crown, catching a glimpse of his body, I thought of Mr. Magoo.

In college I took a tailoring class. I learned there were different body types, with respect to men’s clothing. Without discussing clothing sizes, those types were short, stocky, slim, tall. Mr. Magoo didn’t fit comfortably in any of the categories, a mixture of two, not quite in one or



the other. Admittedly my greeter, sounded like Jim Backus doing a Thurston Howell, III voiceover, this time layering the same with a southern undertone, not the voice of a New England Yankee elite. I thought none of this. I saw Mr. Magoo instead.

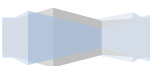
The voice – a familiar one - self-righteous, forever off-putting, pushing a mean and degrading form of Christianity, broaching on proselytizing a less deserving soul. A ritual demonstrated over the years, speaking downward to a lesser subject, belittling. Speaking loud enough so that everyone else could participate in the conversation – a southern practice - demonstrating his cultural superiority; inviting others to participate, bragging in words and manner, enjoying every word spoken, saying what he wanted to say for years. Running free like “My Friend Flicka”, galloping in mythical fields, over his, trespassing onto to mine, comfortable in moving closer than necessary and speaking his truths. He sure did. Standing within inches, not at all for comforting purposes; words spoken in a certain southern-kind-of-way; a manner particularly prevalent during the era of segregation. Nothing I was willing to start singing Oh Happy Days about; those were not the good days, never were, never will be in my mind. The cashiers’ eyes and ears moved closer, not physically closer – closer, closer - I hope the latter concept is understood. There is no better way of explaining what I saw, what I felt. “I thought we got rid of you a long time ago.”

“You tried...” were the initial words spoken, in response, before I decided to straighten the path, move back on the roadway, substituting more appropriate words, to give proper credit to the collective effort I saw then ... “Y’all tried sir.” The correction seemed to please him, allowing the unwelcomed, unexpected, non-humorous, verbal assault to continue.

“Yes, we did.”

“It didn’t work sir.”

“You’re still in your building?” Hmmm, I thought we got rid of you...”



“Sorry, sir, I am still alive. I am still there.”

Oh what a wonderful life; saying more with less, providing a vivid reminder; revealing the double edge carried with the words spoken, slicing and dicing. He meant what he was saying. I had not misinterpreted. No one should be foolish to misinterpret his historically situated words. Words spoken with a southern gleefulness, words and behavior I had seen and heard before. Conveyed in less than twenty seconds, immediately stepping back to move away; a satisfied soul. Those older guys in the neighbor also taught me to move my feet, attack at different angles. “Look at your opponent eyes. You see uncertainty, move faster, step forward instead of backward. Swing ... Goddamn it ... Swing!”

I didn’t permit Mr. Magoo to escape. I recognized he wasn’t a cartoon character. The words were not funny. They weren’t harmless. He wanted me to take him seriously. So, I did. I moved closer, to my right, his left, stepping in his path, speaking in a measured, excited, unexcited manner and tone.

“No it didn’t work” [the unexcited mode and manner] ...

“I’ve been writing, negotiating, been in an out of Los Angeles, maybe ... maybe ... maybe ... wish me luck” [the excited mode and manner]...

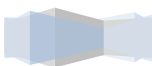
Watching him try to escape, seeing his eyes receive a message he didn’t want to receive. I watched the insult settle in place, insulted because of the response, my continued presence, the refusal to capitulate to his words, world-view, spoken of demise. He seemed to view me as the harasser now, magically switching places. A stalker, even though he approached me, and not the contrary, a position I grew comfortable with, quickly, adding for good measure ... “Bye, bye ... nice seeing you”. Southern graces being what they are, I could not; I would not fail to apply the proper social graces. I had to wish him off appropriately, “Bye, bye ... nice seeing you”.

Words, words, words, dancing about the room, following Mr. Magoo out the door, down the sidewalk. Little animated characters removing their boxing gloves prior to reentering the store.

The cashiers lowered their heads, pretending not to be listening. I went in search of my two bolts, and washers. Looking, sorting ... pulling plastic bins out, comparing, trying to decide which bolt and washer was the right one – wood, metal, bronze, stainless, choices, choices, choices - before a hand touched the small of my back. “Let me help.” She seemingly interpreted the message the same way. She – seemed to me - was making clear she had no intention in approving of the particular episode of the cartoonish short which played out in the front of the store.

Moving from the back of the store to the register; pulling out \$2.00; walking from the register to the sidewalk, greeted by the sun’s welcoming and clarifying glare. Serving as a reminder, *I must cease the pity-party*; a condition which accompanied me into the store. Her glare served to clarify my place in life; similar to the process of clarifying chicken stock; allowing the liquid to cool, skimming off the fat, not rushing the process, tasting, altering, imagining the flavor once the stock is combined with other ingredients. No different than life. Mr. Magoo felt comfortable in approaching and revealing secrets, providing an honest assessment of his views. The act of clarifying, telling on others, on himself, conveying there was nothing I could do or say to the contrary. Not now, nevermore – so he thought. Moving no more than ten steps from the door before the images came flooding back; seeing uncertainty fill both of his eyes, never predicting what he was hearing, compelling his attempted escape. Mine was the act of aiding in the preparation of life’s soup, adding the additional seasonings, clarifying.

Feeling the hand in the small of my back, those memories caused a smile to suddenly appear, drawn by an unknown artist, across a brown canvas, etching images, into my mind,



accompanying me, merely a block into the two block walk back. Holding the screws and washers aloft, bounding, bouncing, instead of walking, not because I felt proud of the miniscule contribution to the local economy, instead thanking the gods for the reminder of why I have elected to write.

Telling stories readily misunderstood, inviting strangers onto a different porch, to view the world from a different angle, a different light, to share - our, yours, mine – collective stories. Painting a picture using possessive words - theirs, yours, mine - deciphering and seeking a collective meaning. Converting, sharing ideas - we, ours – coveting the disenfranchised and ignored stories, folding them into a communal story, telling the tales of life. Deciphering obstructions placed along the way. Stories which may forever remain foreign tales, perhaps forever retaining a different meaning to others; accepting these realities, willing to move forward still so that the world which is cherished by Quincy and Roy does not become the reality again.

Haunting images, both real and imagined, occupying seen and unseen spaces; real and surreal. Vivid images, forever present characters, life experiences which continue to pick at the sores, never allowing the injuries to heal. Slaps, jabs, punches to the body, head, psyche; working in a strange, opposite way, preventing my silence. Voices yelling from secreted places; piercing sounds, ever present reminders - these are the reasons why I write.

Being assigned the responsibility to clean the freshly picked peas; given a seat, a clear set of instructions. Looking around the room, counting the bushels, remembering I had to finish by nightfall. Sorting, picking out bad peas, rocks, trash; bushel after bushel, recounting each bushel; adding, subtracting, concluding my elders' instructions were foolhardy, unrealistic. *I can't do all of these by nightfall.* Knowing full-well I dare not say what I was thinking, figuring out a more efficient way of sorting; moving the peas through both hands, using multiple senses,

adapting the sight-only method, to feel, touch and sight – much like life, similar to writing. Earth's bounty flowing through each finger; distinctive smells claiming the room; worms, bugs, lizards buried deep, secreted, moving from place to place, hiding, emerging, seeking to avoid disclosure, planning an escape during the sorting process; moving through fingers, onto the floor; the same as lies, truths, exposed - as the skies darkened, before the elders reentered to room expecting to see all the peas culled, picked and cleaned. The ordinary, mundane, the daily rhythms of life ... words, words, words - pushing outward onto the screen, auto-correct be damned.

Mr. Quincy Magoo's approach and words reminded me why I write. Assuring me the decision was not pure and utter folly. Recognizing the engrafted fear and terror bestowed over time, forever able to insert horror in the middle of the presumably comedic story, even if there was never any intention to write a story expressing horror. Seeing fiction in a non-fiction story, sometimes life is unbelievable. Seeing the lines blur, questioning what I saw, heard, remembered. Sometimes seeing what others are incapable of seeing, over, over, over again. Conquering my own fears – moving, jabbing, receiving the blow, not giving up, keeping my hands up, slowing the punch, writing for self-preservation, for our, mines, others' survival.

Bounding and bouncing down the sidewalk, laughing internally; humor injected at an unexpected place; in an unexpected and unpredicted manner. A reminder of the vitality of life, the nourishment from which humor derives and evolves, reminding myself never to forget to smile and laugh. Multi-faceted stories seen through different lenses; much like the diversity of the colors bestowed on the eyes' irises - black, brown, grey, blue, hazel, green ... never forgetting, to tell the tale. Thanking Mr. Magoo, his words, the reminders. Cherishing and celebrating his being feeling comfortable enough – to tell on himself and others - to convey his

truths, relieving himself of the apparent burdens he held, his deepest thoughts. A burden he probably had secreted for years.

Our meeting was much like therapy, I guess. Hopefully he felt better. I surely did. My thoughts were then followed by a not-at-all contained chuckle. Knowing Quincy Magoo held himself out to be an extremely religious man, I prayed to his God he didn't trip when exiting – particularly after sharing – his, my, our – watching him move to stop me from talking, with hands positioned in the universal symbol of STOP, eyes saying he didn't want to hear what I had to say. The abrupt movement of the body – turning, turning, turning - moving faster than his stated years; fleeing from the porch, not liking the view, seeing words and images which were not his, was the therapy that day. I pray I was of some help.

