

# What's a Brother to do?

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I was in the second grade. We were standing in line waiting to be divided into teams for a game of kick ball. I must have had a crush on a girl in my class because I stepped out of line to kiss her. All I remember about the incident was that evening my father telling me kissing a white girl was going to get me killed. Somehow the incident had reached my parents. A year or two before he'd also told me if somebody called me a nigger to pick up something and hit them with it. That advice resulted in my getting beaten up for the first time. Neither one of these events taught me anything about race nor the social mores of the day. That first time I was called a nigger, I assumed I had made the other kid angry, and my response was to call him fat! My father never explained why I was supposed to hit him.

Later I noticed that all of the people coming out of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Catholic churches near Main Street were white and that everyone at my church, The New Hope Baptist,

on a dusty, pot holed dirt road in a comparatively remote wooded area of town were “Colored.” As I recall, in public, we were not yet Negroes. That was more formal, only in books and then only sometimes. We were approximately twenty years and a maturing civil rights movement away from being “African Americans” or “People of Color,” a more inclusive reference most commonly used today.

Once in Junior High with the Civil Rights movement in full swing and some white people acting out their anger both on television and to my face, did my personal age of innocence to come to an end. It was during that time that I learned two very important things for my mental and social survival: first to run fast and second, when to stand my ground and not hesitate to do or use whatever was available or necessary to bring any hostile situation to a quick and hopefully satisfactory conclusion. Some of the town punks or as my grandmother referred to, them, “White Trash,” would occasionally go on what, in some parts of the country, were called “Coon Hunts.” This usually meant finding a black kid by himself, (it was safer to out-number him,) provoke him into a fight or just start in beating up on him. During those years outside of school, I mostly played with the few other black kids in town although not exclusively. I had always had white friends.

I’m chuckling, as I write this because I’m remembering the look on the face of the Metuchen librarian the afternoon, I took out two books of poetry and a third one on boxing. I am thankful, especially in retrospect, not just for the white friends I had but the tenderness of their parents. Without them and my loving mother, I might have traveled a very different path.

My life changed in High School. With the exception of gym there were rarely any black kids in any of my classes and with the exception of track and field we usually didn’t do the same sports! I also became involved in numerous other activities, including The Student Council, The Thespians and our school literary publication The Scriblarean. I became the only black member of the Key Club. It was during this time I set my sights on going to art school.

Among other things, I was voted co-captain of the track team, most

popular, most versatile and most artistic in my class. With almost every club or team, I joined there would be some other black, usually male, school-mate(s) telling me, wrongly,

“They don’t want no niggas doin’ that.”

I’ll admit, it was true that there might have been some whites and blacks who expected and maybe even wanted me to fail. I experienced that same self-defeating attitude from other blacks during various stages of my adult life as well. Early in my career, I was the assistant art director of a then new and popular publication for black women, Essence magazine. After about a year, I was offered and accepted the position of associate art director of Harper’s Bazaar. When I gave notice to my Essence art director he predictably said,

“They don’t want no niggas at Bazaar!”

Exasperated, I returned to my desk saying,

“Yeah, you’re right and that’s why they’re hiring me and not you!”

A year or so ago black high school acquaintance found me on a social media platform and sent me an email listing a number of the obvious and numerous offenses and atrocities against African Americans. He ended his missive telling me,

“Wake up!”

He was not the first person to presume to tell me what I should think and or feel as a black person. Where once these boldface assertions angered me now, they only fill me with inertia. He not unlike some others I’ve experienced seem trapped in an echo chamber and unable to do anything truly constructive other than complain or admonish others who don’t adhere to their particular orthodoxy. Others point their anger directly at white people attempting to, as Tom Wolfe coined, “Mau Mau the Flack Catchers.” This means weaponizing guilt as opposed to exercising education and persuasion as a means of change.

Since my teens, my sin seems to have been not being black enough or as it was articulated by some, back in the day,

“Trying to be white.”

Does that mean that when I die everything I did and said in life won't have been done by a black man? That, of course, was and still is a projection. I've even been accused of trying to be white for speaking proper English! At times this has caused me to wonder if perhaps, somewhere, there exists a leather bound, gold stamped, manual that has somehow escaped me, with a title approximating, "How To Be Black: A Guidebook," complete with a glossary, a list of rules, diagrams and other clearly delineated parameters as to where I can go, who I can associate with, date, marry, what art and music I can openly enjoy, what clothes I should wear, what movies I should value, who should be my preferred authors, actors, athletes, etc. Anything else is obviously a rejection of who I really am.

What's a "Brother" to do?

