

We were adults. Not one of us harbored racial hatred. We were eight women. And all of us came together out of a desire to help foster in our schools and communities racial reconciliation and unity. Seven of us were white. One of us was black. All of us were open-minded and aspired to the same goals. And yet by the second day of our symposium, there was anger.

It is the volatile nature of race in America that even those who agree fundamentally must wrangle over particulars. This is part of the reason that the Mississippi State Legislature has passed a bill making Civil Rights Education mandatory for all teachers and all grade levels, though the bill has yet to become law. This is what we, both Americans and Mississippians, still have yet to overcome: the legacies of slavery and of Jim Crow. Our job is no less challenging than the job of our parents and grandparents. They overturned laws, but we must transform the ingrained mistrust that two-hundred years has engendered, and that, in the thirty years since the official "end" of the Civil Rights Movement, we as a society have not bested.

To this end, the University of Mississippi Writing Project, in partnership with the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, sponsored a workshop entitled "Rethinking Race and Writing in Rural Schools" during the week of June 11th this past summer. The goals of the workshop included exploring how race and poverty have played a role in our state's development, as well as seeking ways to begin effective, culturally sensitive discussions about race in our classrooms.

Day One – Myth Busting

We began by addressing the Civil Rights Movement as it has traditionally been taught. Often, children come away from school knowing only about the icons – Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, James Meredith. How Ms. Parks single-handedly started the Civil Rights Movement by an act of civil disobedience. How Dr. King picked up the ball and ran with it – everyone else following on his heels. How James Meredith bravely integrated the University of Mississippi.

And yet, Rosa Parks was not the first person, let alone the only one, to refuse to give up her seat on a bus. Martin Luther King was not the only leader of the movement. James Meredith was not the first or only person to walk into a school in order to integrate it. These people are icons for a reason, but none of them accomplished what they did alone. As a group of teachers, we agreed that rather than focus on the icons, we needed to begin familiarizing students with the grassroots organizations that raised these icons to national prominence. Only in this way can children begin to see that they, not someone else who is somehow extra-ordinary or magical, have the power to begin to transform their own world – their own county – their own country.

On this day as well, we were treated to a walking tour of the OleMiss campus with Gerald Walton, a white professor at the university during the 60's; Curtis Wilkie, a former white student who was on campus during the rioting that took place when James Meredith came to register; and Don Cole, an African American who followed in James Meredith's footsteps and attended OleMiss in the years immediately following. Mr. Wilkie pointed out to us the place under a tree where a French journalist was shot and died during the rioting. He described for us a scene that included tear gas, locals in pickup trucks buzzing the Lyceum (which was then the administration building) and shooting holes in it, and how, in the days after, a fall of rain would release the smell of tear

gas from the earth once again. What we learned most of all from the stories of these gentlemen was that it makes a great deal of difference to have someone who was actually there describe an historical event to you.

We ended this day by visiting the Archives and Special Collections at the J.D. Williams Library on campus. The university has a wealth of manuscript, music, and photo collections that document both the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi as well as artifacts from both the slavery and Jim Crow eras. These collections were opened to us as we began to investigate the realities behind the myths in general, and the history of the movement in Mississippi in particular.

Day Two – Controversy

Dr. Susan Glisson of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation presented a talk on the integral role of women in the Civil Right Movement and expanded our knowledge of Traditional Narrative vs. Historically Accurate Narrative. In the afternoon, we viewed the segments of the *Eyes on Prize* series that documented the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Following that, we read and discussed several children's books that address different aspects of the sixties and the movement and rated them according to how accurate they were and how much they tended to promote the myths.

While we were ostensibly discussing the Civil Rights Movement, however, what we kept coming back to again and again and again were what we'll call the "atrocities." The lynchings. The beatings. The spitting and screaming and murders. We listened to a recording of "Strange Fruit," originally published in 1940, the lyrics of which vividly portray the victims of lynch mobs. As the workshop was a forum for examining materials and new ways of teaching them, the question was asked, "What is the thinking behind teaching this particular song? How will teaching this song further our stated goal of promoting reconciliation?"

The presenter had thought that the reasons behind teaching such material were self-evident. Lynching was a cruel reality in this country and one of the reasons for the Civil Rights Movement. Others agreed and said that not teaching it would be tantamount to "covering up" or "denying" its place in our history, as some people attempt to deny the Holocaust.

And yet the point was made that while we were concentrating on Emmett Till and others like him, while we were looking almost exclusively at the art and literature that came out of that pain, we had not discussed even one of the score of organizations that were integral to the fight to stop those atrocities. And we realized that this has been one of the problems with the way we traditionally teach the Civil Rights Movement.

We teach the sensational aspects because they are easily covered and easily understood. It is much more difficult to explore the philosophical differences between CORE, SCLC, SNCC, and NAACP. Not to mention SDS, COFO, MFDP, MIA, the Black Panthers, and the Nation of Islam. To chart their varied leaders and contributions. To truly understand how vast the movement was, how many people, black and white and brown, were involved. To examine how the aims of the movement evolved as laws were passed and the Constitution amended. And,

finally, to teach our children how to use those same techniques to continue to fight to realize the dream so poignantly described by Dr. King on that August day in Washington when he addressed the March for Jobs and Freedom.

The mood was tense that afternoon, and all of us chose our words carefully as we disagreed about the inherent good of teaching that one, twelve-line lyric.

Days 3-5 – A Trip in the Way-Back Machine

On Wednesday, we moved away from the questions of race and civil rights to concentrate on an issue that goes hand-in-hand with them – the special problems of students from poverty backgrounds. In the thirty years since the triumphs of the movement, the children in our rural schools, black and white, have remained on the lowest rungs of the ladder when it comes to household income. By reminding ourselves of the special problems they face in addition to the ongoing issues of race, we remembered that Dr. King's was a personal crusade against poverty as much it was for equal rights under the law. Equity is one of the goals of the movement that has yet to be achieved.

As much as having witnesses who were actually there come and speak with students, we learned that working with primary documents can be just as thrilling. With Dr. Nancy Bercaw of the UM History Department as our guide, on Thursday we delved into the world of authentic research. Starting at the university library, we looked at census records detailing the names of slaves and their owners. These records were kept because, during the time before the Civil War, each slave counted as three-fifths of a person. At the public library, we looked up the names of slave owners that we had gathered to find out whether or not they had wills on record with Lafayette County, which was a hit-or-miss proposition. Armed with this information, we went to the courthouse and looked up the actual documents. It is truly something to hold the original copy of a slave-owner's will in one's hand and see to whom he left his slaves as a matter of course, listed with the rest of his property, when he died.

Friday was a time for reflection and for sharing some of the ideas we'd come up with on our own during the week to further the mandate of the workshop. Each of us had been charged with developing a presentation suitable for staff developments and weekend workshops on Civil Right education. However, as our site's co-director, Allison Movitz, noted, "We realized by the time the workshop was nearing an end that we needed far more information to develop these lessons than one week allowed. Progress is slow, and no progress has been slower than that of racial reconciliation."

Conclusion

The campus at the University of Mississippi is a site of memory. Holly Springs in Marshall County where one of the Freedom Schools was organized in the summer of 1964 is a site of memory. Fannie Lou Hamer's house in Ruleville is a site of memory. These sites of memory exist all over our state and all over the south. Engaging students in an exploration not just of the national Civil Rights Movement but of the movement in their own backyard can be a way to make

the past come alive and to teach kids that everyday people can make a difference. This was driven home to us by our tour guides and the authentic research we did with Dr. Bercaw.

Mississippi was not just a place where atrocities were perpetrated. Mississippi was where hard-won advances were made for the cause of freedom. Perhaps the best thing to come out of this symposium was the realization that concentrating our lessons on the victims and the perpetrators of crimes may not be the best way to foster reconciliation between the races. Instead, we need to think about concentrating on the actions people took to right what was wrong, on the way people of both races joined together to say enough is enough, and on the personal courage it requires to stand up and say, "Now, looky here..." when you know somebody with a big stick will be along in a hurry to knock you down.

The Jena 6. The continuing tragedy on the Gulf Coast. Don Imus. Again and again we are reminded of the deep issues of race in America, but we fail to address the underlying problems that these incidents embody and look to the courts to sort things out. However, as Sister Mary Lazarus, so eloquently played by Mary Wickes in *Sister Act*, said, "We can't leave it up to the Feds." The leaders and activists involved in the Civil Rights Movement knew this. They reached out to their opponents in the spirit of non-violence and love. This is the message our children need to take from our teaching of the Civil Rights Movement. As much as it was the way toward social change in the sixties, it remains the path toward reconciliation today.

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