Small Steps

Through the turbulent 1960's, my father was equivocal on civil rights. In principal, he believed in the fundamental equality of all people, but he felt that changing things too fast was a bad thing. In his speech, he was slow to move from "colored" to "black." Like most of the men of his age, Thomas G. Leary served in the military in World War II – he was a Staff Sergeant in the Army Air Corps, serving in the 891st Chemical Company.

He rarely spoke about his military service. I only learned about this incident many years after he died when I contacted one of the fellows who served in his platoon. In those days, advanced chemical training was at Camp Sibert in Anniston, Alabama. The unit was filled with northern boys who were used to dealing with "coloreds" (then the accepted term for African-Americans), but most had never seen racial segregation like it was practiced in the Deep South.

Even up north, whites got to go into the front doors of the theater while the door for coloreds was down the alley around back. There was a tacit understanding among all involved that light people were simply better than dark people. But down here it was like they were two different species. By law, by tradition and by force, people of African descent were banned from any place, activity or position of human privilege. Laughing at them, berating them and even beating them was a normal part of life. It helped stabilize the natural order of things (unless you were colored).

Most of the 891st was from the northeast: tough kids from the mill towns of New England and Pennsylvania. They'd seen segregated drinking fountains before. But here, the tall one labeled "Whites" was at a comfortable height for drinking, and the one at curbside labeled "Animals" was right where they'd need it. But the one in the middle marked "Coloreds" was just low enough to make a man stoop, like you had to bow to the master for a simple sip of water.

And in this crazy drama where all questions were answered by the accident of birth, the army boys were all automatically on the side of tyrants. If the guys were walking up the sidewalk and a black man was approaching them, the fellow would invariably walk into the road to let them pass. They were shocked at the brutality of the domination, and at how passive the African-Americans had become. If slavery had indeed ended, it was replaced with something quite similar.

Then, something happened that involved one of the guys on the company basketball team. The fellow was a "Portagee" from New Bedford, and had dark skin and ethnic features. In fact, the vast majority of Portuguese-speaking people who settled in coastal Massachusetts and Rhode Island were from the Cape Verde Islands, just off the coast of Africa. Ethnically speaking, they think of themselves as Portuguese rather than Africans. The good, tolerant Christians of

New England are likely to treat you as whoever you claim to be; but here in the Old Testament South, he was a nigger.

Fifty years after the fact, the exact nature of the transgression seems to have faded into the shadows, but the men of the basketball team decided they'd had enough. The locals told them that they had to hate and shun their buddy, but the players just weren't going to do that. The whole hateful system only worked if everybody went along with it, and the basketball team simply wasn't going to cooperate.

Camp Sibert was the last stop on the bus line, meaning the Army boys always boarded empty busses. The team headed for the back of the bus, occupying all the seats reserved for blacks. The bus drivers went apoplectic with rage, and they'd scream their lungs out at the "damned white niggers" in uniform. The Army boys got quite an education on Southern racial epithets that week, and it spiced up their language for the rest of the war. It was exclusively an enlisted men's protest, and the only one of the sergeants to join in was Sergeant Thomas Leary.

It was his kind of protest. Dad was the architect of the basketball team's tight defense: the court-covering grid that didn't give the other guy an inch to move into. Don't foul the guy - just make sure you're in his way. Flood the zone. And even now, I can see him looking stupidly into the bus driver's eyes like he didn't have the first clue what was going on. It was an irritating little trait of his: whenever I said something really dumb, he'd flash me that look like he wanted me to explain what the hell I was talking about. He never challenged me, he just made me explain myself until I saw where I was an idiot. He was going to make that bus driver defend every foul act all the way back to the first slave ship in 1609.

Ultimately, not much happened: the guys got kicked off the bus a couple of times and had to walk into town. But they were used to marching, so it wasn't much of a hardship. The protest was peaceful, but it was short-lived. Apparently, one of the local blacks impressed on one of the soldiers that they really weren't helping things. As far as the coloreds were concerned, it was hard enough to live in Alabama without the ruling class being infuriated. It didn't take a lot of imagination to understand that after the Yankees moved on, the local African-Americans would pay for the impudence of the 891 Cml. Co.

In the long march to racial equality, their little protest was a pretty small step. The Yankees sitting in the wrong seats and pissing off the bus drivers in Anniston Alabama probably had no lasting effect on racial justice in the South. But sometimes, I think that you don't get to where you have voter registration and Freedom Riders unless you have angry white basketball players first. A lot of small steps needed to be taken before Dr. King was able to electrify the nation with his "I Have A Dream" speech. It's hard to say.

Dr. King often observed that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.” But it doesn’t curve towards justice on its own: it bends toward justice because we pull it that way - in small steps.