

Roots

Guy M. Townsend

I wrote this column about four years ago for the small Kentucky newspaper I was then editing. I didn't identify my hometown by name, but I did mention several of our classmates by name, including two people whom I vaguely remembered as being members of our class but who evidently were not—specifically, Eddie Pena and Hawkins Ming. Also, my recollection that Hawkins was of Japanese rather than Chinese extraction may have been erroneous as well.

Anyway, those errors aside, I thought that that the following reflections might be of interest to other members of the Class of 1961.

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East Side Street. That was the name of the street I grew up on. East Side Street looked like a street that would be named East Side Street. It was a short street—only two blocks long before it petered out into a couple of dirt ruts—and the houses on either side of it were mostly large old houses past their prime, except for two tiny new houses, mirror images of each other, which shared a common dirt driveway on the east side of East Side Street.

We moved into one of those two tiny houses when I was five years old—my mother, my father, my younger brother, and my then-infant sister, five of us in a brand-new tiny little two-bedroom house considerably smaller than a thousand square feet—and it was from that same tiny little house that I left to go off to college thirteen years later.

Ironically, almost within moments of my departure my family moved out of that little house and into a three-bedroom house in a better neighborhood on the opposite side of town, but *that* house was never home to me. I stayed in it from time to time when I would come home from college for visits, including a couple of months during the one summer that I didn't attend classes year round, but by the time I graduated from college my parents' marriage had reached what seems in retrospect its inevitable end and the three-bedroom house had passed on to some other family.

Following their divorce, my mother moved back to her childhood hometown, and my father eventually moved to Memphis, leaving me with no family in that little town and no compelling reason to go back and visit.

In a sense, though—in a very real sense—I have never left that little town or that tiny little house. They remain an integral part of who and what I am.

It was my good fortune to grow up—to the extent that I have in fact grown up—in a small town in the American South in the 1950s. Had my skin been black, then this would be another story entirely, but I was (and remain) white (well, more of a pink, actually), and

that accident of pigmentation allowed me to grow up in an essentially classless society in which “social” distinctions—among us white folks, you understand—really did not amount to much. My closest friends were the son of the superintendent of schools, the son of the (Jewish) owner of the local Chrysler dealership, and the son of a Chinese grocer. Except for Jimmy Yee, whose family lived in the back of their grocery store, the home I lived in was far and away the most modest, but I cannot remember ever being the least bit self-conscious about that fact.

Bruce, the superintendent's son (and, yes, he did ultimately turn out to be homosexual, although it was twenty years after our high school graduation before I had any inkling of it), lived in a sprawling one-story home, and Ronny O'Mell (I swear I'm not making these names up), the auto dealer's son, lived in a relatively modest home—right next door, as a matter of fact, to the First Christian Church which my family regularly attended—until his father died and his mother married another Jewish entrepreneur named Julius Lewis, whereupon the O'Mell clan, which included a younger brother named Steve, moved into Lewis's large, two-story home on Pearl Street, the most prestigious address in town.

My father, whose family hailed from Mississippi, was not the most enlightened man in town—indeed, was probably not the most enlightened man on East Side Street—and I recall him asking me one day why I didn't have any *American* friends—Jews and Chinese not being *real* Americans, you understand.

But this local bias against minorities such as Jews and Orientals was relatively benign, and I recall feeling only curiosity about, not superiority to, Ronny and Jimmy. (We also had, for a short time, a Japanese classmate with the totally improbable name of Hawkins Ming. I say “improbable” not just because “Hawkins” is not your everyday, run of the mill Japanese name, but also because “Ming” is about as *Chinese* a name as you can come up with. And we had a Mexican-American schoolmate as well, named Eddie Pena, a bright, smart, and extremely personable young man who, if memory serves, eventually became an individual of some importance in state government.)

My point is that we did not work hard at maintaining ethnic, social, religious, or class distinctions in my little hometown. Even the strict separation of the races was not in those days so much the product of conscious thought as it was the result of the innate conservatism of the human organism and its tendency to uncritically accept *what is* as *what ought to be*.

In my defense, while I was unquestionably (and unquestioningly) a bigot from my earliest days until I entered military service, I was never, not even for one moment, *consciously* a bigot. Thought is anathema to bigotry, and the very moment that I applied thought to the question of “racial superiority” I cast bigotry aside as a morally and intellectually bankrupt idea.

It is silly, stupid, and downright evil to pretend that a person's worth is somehow tied to the amount of pigmentation in his skin. But one of the hardest things for people to do is

to turn loose of stupid ideas, be they inherited or acquired. The story of humankind is filled with fitful starts forward, interrupted by long periods of stagnation and punctuated by frequent regressions. Two steps forward and one step backward, if we're lucky. But that's a subject for another column....

Three or four years back I had occasion to return, for a few hours, to that little town of my youth. Not surprisingly, in nearly four decades things had changed a bit. The whole town had, of course, shrunk. This is a phenomenon which is hard to comprehend by those lucky individuals who spend all of their lives in one location, transitioning smoothly from infancy to youth to adulthood to old age without ever leaving (for any appreciable period of time) their hometowns.

I drove slowly past the tiny little house on East Side Street, no doubt arousing suspicion and unease among mothers in the neighborhood who, in the way of good mothers everywhere, just *knew* that that strange man slowly driving by in his strange car could not be up to anything good.

It was different than it had been when I left it. Not just the new vinyl siding or the missing pecan tree. It was different in a more fundamental way, which it has taken me some time to understand.

East Side Street is not a place. It is a state of mind. It is where the foundations of who I am today, for good or ill, were laid. East Side Street continues on unaltered in my mind and in my being. East Side Street is the reason I am a Democrat, and, perhaps paradoxically, it is the reason I am an ardent opponent of racism and bigotry of every stripe. It is also the reason why I think I have the right to speak my mind, to say unpopular things when I believe them to be true. East Side Street is the reason I believe that human beings have a duty, an obligation, to behave fairly and honorably towards each other.

Paradoxically, East Side Street is also the reason my brother is a rabid Republican and my sister is one of the least tolerant human beings that I know.

Thomas Wolfe famously said you can't go home again, but I would say you can never leave home to begin with. You always take it with you. But what *it* is varies with every one of us.