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The Story of a First-Generation College Student

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By

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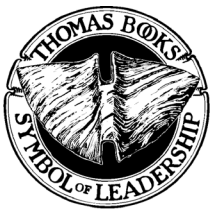

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PREFACE

The primary audience for this book is first-generation college students. Whether they are in two-year or four-year colleges, I give the readers an example of the power of a parent's dream, the positive and negative outcomes of a student's hard work, the stuff caring teachers and supportive school administrators are made of, and the significance of resilience, tenacity, and self-growth. Hopefully, my story will give those who read this book a dose of what stick-to-itiveness meant to me up close and personal. Early on, I had many more classroom failures than academic successes. I had bad semesters that I thought would never end. But my mother's belief in me and several teachers' dogged determination to dig out the academic abilities that were buried deep inside my mind. These academic challenges and help come to each student in their own different ways. Sometimes help comes slowly, sometimes it comes fast, and sometimes it never comes. My foremost message to first-generation and other-generation students is this: Ask for help when you are stumped, seize whatever opportunities to help you improve, and do your best work.

Secondly, this book is written for teachers, school counselors, nurses, and other personnel who help students during their educational journeys. Their assistance can be helpful or hurtful to whatever generation of students they are helping. What they do to students and how they do it matters hugely. Thirdly, this book is written for professional helpers who are not school-related but who want to become better helpers in other careers. Lastly, this book is written for people who are not professional helpers but are curious about the travails and struggles of poverty-stricken people like me and my family members.

To give those who read this book a modicum of information about me, I strip my personhood partially naked for them to peek at it. Paraphrasing Bob Seger's song "Shame on the Moon": "Until people have been inside me, they don't know what I know." Much of what I find out about myself is drawn from some of the most formative incidents in my life. Under the best of circumstances, a clear retrieval of what has happened to me is, at best, difficult for me to reconstruct. From kindergarten to college and beyond, aggregates of people and their behavior did make sense in many instances.

And those that did seldom came easily or quickly to me when I summon them. The truth of my recollections is that too much of what happened is lost to time. Some of the events that I harvested faded in and out of my consciousness like old-time movies—they frequently were fuzzy ruminations. And at other times, they were clear and precise. When they were not clear or precise, I used my imagination to fill in the missing pieces.

This way of telling my story in life stages was both frustrating and exhilarating. When some of my retrievals seem incomplete, it is because they are. Stated another way: The recalled parts of my narratives do not always fit neatly. Some of them are bloated and a few of them are imagined. Hopefully, the combination of my subjective recollections and objective information drawn from time-sensitive research studies of mine will allow readers to climb into my skin and walk around it, so to speak. Then, they may come closer to knowing me as I know me. I have had a long, tedious journey from illiteracy to literacy, from segregation to desegregation, from poverty to affluence, and from disliking people who came from cultures different from my own to loving them.

Nonviolent theories and behavior were like a river flowing through my life, slowly during my childhood and adolescence and rapidly after I enrolled in college. The Civil Rights Movement is the name of that river. It was the foremost foundation upon which I built my philosophy of helping other people. So, of course, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was my hero, role model, and guide. His words and strategies of change are generously sprinkled throughout the later chapters of this book.

But Foremost among my heroes are many other people who have given me their love, support, and guidance. They provided me with the most seminal moments of my personal growth. First among them were my parents. After them is my wife, Barbara. She is my best friend, soulmate, most constructive critic, and my loudest cheerleader. I have not thanked my children and grandchildren enough for allowing me to take time away from them to help needy people. Finally, I am grateful to my community friends and college colleagues who supported me beyond the call of duty. My special thanks go to Alexander Zabel, one of my grandchildren, who read the drafts, gave me excellent suggestions for improving the book, and ended up being the copyeditor.

G. H.

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Chapter 1

THE BEGINNING OF ME

For more than five decades, when students in my classes at the University of Oklahoma and throughout the world learn that I was the first person in my poverty-stricken family to graduate from high school and college, without fail, an empathetic student would ask me, "Aren't you proud to be the first generation to do that?" My answer has always been like Jackie Robinson's answer to the reporter who asked him about being the first Negro to play on a professional baseball team. "No, to the contrary. I take little pleasure in being the first. I will take great pleasure when the second, third and fourth generation of me have accomplished similar feats."

When I was born, The Great Depression in America had not ended, and it was still taking a heavy toll on poverty-stricken families, including my own. Most of the people in America were poverty-stricken, and going from abject poverty to middle-income required the successful ones to have a specific set of skills: competence, capacity, and tenacity. But as you will see in this chapter, it was more complicated than that. They also needed lots of good luck. There were precious few jobs available for individuals who had those skill sets, and there were almost none for Black workers who had them.

Dreams and Reality

My mother, Lula Mae Henderson, gave birth to me on June 18, 1932, in Hurtsboro, Alabama. She was 17 years old, and my father, Kidd Large Henderson, was 21 years old. They were poor sharecroppers and so were their parents too. Shortly after I was born, my mother told my father and grandparents that I was going to take our family out of poverty, and that I would do so by becoming the first person in our family to graduate from high school and college. It was indeed a stunning or bodacious prediction, or wish, or hope, or whatever you want to call it.

We lived in a small two-bedroom clapboard house. It did not have electricity or indoor plumbing. It did have a living room, a kitchen, a wood-burning

stove, three windows, three kerosene lanterns, and a tin tub for bathing. There was an outhouse that had a deep hole in the center and a raised seat over the top. Also, there was a fenced area outside our house where chickens were kept before they were killed and cooked. We had a few clothes and often we did not have much to eat, but we had each other, and that filled us with love. But my mother wanted more for us than a meager existence.

When I was four years old, my mother, father and I hastily moved to East Chicago, Indiana. My father told me that we moved out of the South because no white landowners would pay them good money for their crops, and he wanted to have enough money one day to not be poor, but this was not the whole truth.

My mother told me that her mother, Eliza Crawford, never got over us moving away from her. She especially missed me, her "Little Red." She nicknamed me that because my rustic brown skin was like hers and the other members of her American Indian tribe. I was never told which tribe she belonged to. To my mother's chagrin, Grandmother Eliza died two years after we moved away. My father said she died of a broken heart. The full impact of her death didn't hit me until my mother was notified of her passing. Then she showed me a picture of Grandmother Eliza holding me in her arms when I was a baby. She was an important person in the making of me, and she died before I could really know her.

Eight years later, my parents told me the truth about our move to East Chicago. Employment had nothing to do with it. Race relations had everything to do with it. My father was run out of town by members of the Ku Klux Klan. As the story goes, the incident happened over a plank of wood. The city of Hurtsboro laid these planks adjacent to the downtown businesses to protect white people's shoes from getting wet during rainy days. On a particular rainy day, my father refused to move off one of these planks to let a white man pass. He did not just refuse to yield the plank if that was not bad enough. He knocked the white man into the street.

Two hours later, another white man came to our house. He told my father that he should go far away from Alabama. Specifically, he told him, "You better leave this house before sundown. At sundown, some of us are coming here to put you in your Black place." That was not an idle threat. They were going to come to our house, drag my father outside, and beat him nearly to death before lynching him. The visitor was a white Mason. Because my father was a Black Mason, a white Mason extended a courtesy to him. And he saved my father from a horrible death.

My father's brother Louis helped my parents pack our belongings into the back of a truck that he had borrowed from a friend. Then, he drove us to the New Addition Neighborhood in East Chicago, Indiana, where my mother's oldest sister, Early Bee Junikin, lived. She invited my parents to

come to live with her until they could get jobs, and then we could move into our own place. Also living with my aunt were her husband, Shield, and their two children, Katie and Robert. Ninety-five percent of the approximately 200 people who lived in the New Addition were Black.

The house was an old wood garage that had been converted into a rental property. It had a wood floor; two tiny bedrooms; a small living room that had a couch with a bed under it that pulled out; and four fold-up chairs. The kitchen had a wood-burning stove; a small table; and six fold-up chairs; two kerosene lanterns and three windows that provided lighting after dark. There was no indoor plumbing or electricity. The toilet was in a small, partitioned area of the kitchen. There was a door to this partitioned room, and inside was a hole in the floor with a seat over it. There was a stack of newspapers to the side. We bathed in a tin tub on the kitchen floor. Without a doubt, Aunt Early Bee's house was a big step down from our home in Alabama.

Within a year, my parents got jobs and we moved to another garage. They had no other choice that they could afford. It was different from Aunt Early Bee's garage in a bad way. It had a dirt floor. There were no windows, no toilet facility, and no wood stove to cook on. We still bathed in a tin tub, and we slept on a soiled mattress that was placed along a wall during the day. Most of our clothes were kept in two large suitcases. The few other clothes we had were hung on nails on the wall. Our landlord lived in a fine big house a few feet away from the garage. He let my mother use his kitchen to cook our meals. We ate our meals on top of the mattress in the garage. He also let us use a toilet that was in the basement of his house. Even with those deficiencies, my parents thought the garage was a bargain. The rent was forty dollars a month. We were dirt poor, so to speak.

One year later, we moved into the Makran Building in the East Chicago Calumet neighborhood. It was ten miles from the New Addition neighborhood. There were eight apartments in the building. My mother's father, Will Crawford, lived in a basement apartment below us. I called him Papa. He moved there one year before we did.

Of the approximately 2,500 people who lived in the Calumet, about 150 of us were Black, and all but a few of us lived in a 10 by 5 block square feet area. Papa told me that Black and white migrants "Southernized" East Chicago. They brought their southern dialects, social customs, and food preferences with them. Also, the two racial groups lived in segregated clusters by choice. The Makran Building was occupied mostly by Black people who came from Alabama, and a few of them came from Georgia.

The one-bedroom apartment that we lived in was a big step up from the two garages that we previously lived in. It had indoor plumbing, electricity, a gas stove, a small kitchen, a tiny bathroom, and a medium-sized living room. My parents filled the apartment with used furniture, a tiny icebox,

and a small oil-burning heater. I slept on the couch in the living room. It had a bed that pulled out from underneath it. [Yes, the living room was also my bedroom.] The only permanent book in our apartment was the Bible, and the only picture that hung on the living room wall depicted Jesus. For entertainment, we listened to a tiny radio that was in the living room. Our apartment had a lingering smell of insecticides. The pipe under the kitchen sink leaked, and the tap water that we drank out of the faucet had chemical particles in it. The building was not well insulated, nor was the outside storage garage unit where the tenants kept their excess property. The roofs on both buildings leaked during rainy days. Furthermore, all the apartments were infested with rats, roaches, and bedbugs, and flies flew in and out when we opened the doors or windows.

We put down traps to kill the rats. But that seldom happened. They ate the cheese that was in the traps and then scurried away before the bar that was supposed to kill them came down. As for the roaches, they must have been mutant strains. The insecticides that we generously sprayed on them seldom worked. Instead of dying, most of them quickly crawled back to their hiding places. Ironically, the insecticides were seemingly more hazardous to my health than they were to the roaches. I had an extremely difficult time breathing after each spraying. There was a seemingly never-ending succession of rats and roaches. They fascinated me during the day and scared me awake at night. I was scared in a way that I had never been before, and it got worse after I was almost bitten by a rat one night when I tried to retrieve a marble from underneath the couch. I heard that two babies that lived in apartments below us were bitten by rats, and one of them nearly died. The babies added to my fear of rats. I wished my parents could have found another apartment and move us into it.

There were no trees or other foliage on the frontside and back of the building, so there was nothing to mitigate the full effects of the hot sun during the summers or cold wind during the winters. Therefore, the apartments were too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. During winters, I slept under an extra blanket with my winter coat on top of it and in the summer, I slept on top of the covers without my winter coat. The result was that I shivered in bed during the winter and sweated profusely during the summer. The lack of adequate sleep reduced my ability to stay fully awake and alert during the daytime. It's little wonder that on the days when I was in school, I often nodded in class and sometimes I fell asleep. One weekend, I slept from Friday night until Sunday afternoon. At that point, my mother thought I was dying. When I woke up, she was shaking me and calling my name in a loud, frantic voice. We laughed about it after I got up, ate some food, and did my chores. Thinking back, my lack of wholesome sleep may have triggered the migraine headaches that I had year-round.