MY LIFETIME OF PRIDE AND PREJUDICE BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER HARVARD

An Invited Essay for the 60th Reunion of the

Harvard Class of 1957

By

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I was reflecting recently on my parents and how my experiences as a well-educated, somewhat privileged member of the black medical community and intelligentsia who had done fairly well in life as an accomplished doctor, author, musician, and bon vivant, compared with their lives as dirt-poor, relatively uneducated, unskilled residents of the ghetto who had no time for recreational activities outside of raising eight children, of whom I was the youngest. Was I truly better off than they were? Indeed, was I even *better* than they were, by comparison?

Those questions are at the core of my deliberations as I go about writing this essay about my life experiences relative to attending Harvard---before, during, and after matriculating at and graduating from what is arguably the world's best university. So prior to delving into the particulars of my successes and accomplishments, I need to explain some things about my background that most of my colleagues in the Class of 1957 may not be familiar with, since most of them had not rubbed elbows with folks from the ghetto. I will try to describe the impact that prejudice had on me and how it modified the pride that I was eventually able to feel.

THE BACKGROUND

I was jolted into realizing what it meant to be a poor black male in America at the tender age of 12, when a white man driving a car deliberately ran me off the road as I was riding my bike in my hometown of Wilmington, Delaware. Up to that time, I was oblivious to the racial discrimination and segregation that existed in this lazy mid-sized industrial town located midway between Philadelphia and Baltimore. It didn't matter to me that I was already being programmed for a certain educational fate in which I was to attend all-black schools from K through 12 with almost no contact with whites except in athletic contests or musical events, and that I was expected to graduate and take some type of menial job or perhaps be lucky enough to get into a small black college in the South where my father came from. I was doing very well in my studies despite having to use second-hand books and other materials that were handed down from the white schools. My teachers recognized some academic talent in me, and they gave me extra instruction which would lead to my getting almost perfect scores on the standardized tests and eventually on the College Boards. It didn't matter that much to me that I couldn't go to the white movie theaters or eat in the restaurants or at the lunch counters in the stores downtown. Although I didn't understand at that time why my mother would not allow me to try on caps, shoes, and other clothes in those stores, it really didn't disturb me. I was a happy-go-lucky little colored kid who was just cruising through life without a care in the world. That is, until that white man ran me off the road and caused me to fall and injure my head, after which he laughed and called me some racial epithets as he drove away.

To add insult to injury quite literally, when I got back on my bike and rode to the local police station to report the incident and turn in the driver's license plate number, I was actually attacked by the white desk sergeant for having the nerve to accuse a white person of committing an offense against a black person. In fact, he physically threw me out of the police station, and again I heard those racial epithets. This is when I had an epiphany: for the first time in my life, I saw the ugly face of prejudice and realized that there was a racial divide between blacks and whites, with blacks being in a powerless position. Later I would learn of the Dred Scott decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, in which it was declared by Chief Justice Roger Taney in 1847 that a black man amounted to only three-

fifths of a white man and therefore had no rights that a white person was bound to respect. That decision from long ago was what allowed the white policeman to deny me the right to lodge a complaint against a white person; it established a culture of prejudice, lack of respect, and justification of bias against blacks which still resounds to this day. It also helped me to understand that this societal attitude underlies the police violence and use of force against black males that we have witnessed so much in this country. It is not seen in other countries because they have not had the racist history that we have had in the United States. I could have been the Treyvon Martin or Michael Brown of my day but for the grace of God.

Realizing the powerless position that Negroes occupied, the great African American educator and orator Booker T. Washington delivered an impassioned speech at the Cotton States and International Exhibition in Atlanta, Georgia in 1895 imploring his people to go slow, lay low, and be subservient and submissive rather than aggressive and progressive. It was called the Atlanta Compromise, and I believe that Mr. Washington intended it to be protective of the freed slaves who were possibly placing themselves in harm's way by attempting to press for full equality in all things. The trend of prejudice and discrimination was further extended in 1896 by another U.S. Supreme Court decision called Plessy versus Ferguson in which it was declared that separate public facilities and educational arrangements were allowable as long as they were equal (which of course they never were). So it should be evident that there was a direct line of prejudice stretching from the Dred Scott decision of 1847 to the Atlanta Compromise of 1895, to the Plessy decision in 1896 to what happened to me at that police station. Everything was connected. Prejudice, intolerance and bigotry had become implanted within our social fabric, and this is what motivated me to become a lifelong combatant against these evils. As I entered Harvard a few years after suffering my incident and other indignities, I was already conditioned by the impact of racial prejudice on me for whatever battles that lay ahead, and I prepared myself to deal with this invisible adversary while I buried myself in my pre-med studies. I doubt that many of my classmates were burdened by such a distraction.

Before going forward about my experiences, I will describe what my parents and their forebears endured, so that we can compare their lives with

mine. My father was born in rural Georgia into a family of ex-slaves who were brought to America from Africa through the Middle Passage on slave ships. After slavery was ended by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, his family was able to acquire some land and property in Georgia in the late 19th century. When he was a child around the turn of the 20th century, they were threatened by night riders of the Ku Klux Klan for having the audacity of being landholders, and were forced to leave all of their property and possessions and travel north to avoid being lynched. They decided to keep going until they crossed the Mason-Dixon Line that divides North and South, and they stopped in Delaware, the first state across this mythical line, and settled there. Meanwhile, my mother was growing up in rural Maryland where her father owned a farm. She and her sisters occasionally traveled to Wilmington, Delaware to socialize at dances and gatherings, and that is where she met and eventually married my father. They had eight children, of which I was the last, and they took menial jobs to support us. There was no money to pay for medical care, and all of the children were delivered by midwives at home. Our house in the ghetto was what was called a "shotgun house", meaning that it was one of a series of row houses where you could stand at the front door and fire a shotgun straight through the back door. That was the way they were made. The toilet was outside, which was pretty rough to use in the winter. There were no supermarkets, gas stations, or other conveniences or accommodations in the neighborhood, and the nearest school was a 2-mile walk away, which was also very difficult to manage in winter. Almost no one had a car, but there was bus and trolley service if you could pay the fare. There always was a strong police presence The cops were on every corner or were constantly driving through or walking their beats, ostensibly to protect us. However, we knew better: they were there to harass us, to make sure that we knew who was in charge, and to continue to stress their dominance. They frequently arrested young men just for gathering on the street corner on a hot summer evening for what they called loitering. I believe that it was planned to keep us constantly off balance and therefore unable to commit any crimes. I always wondered why they were trying to keep us from stealing, when there was really nothing of any value to steal where we lived.

My mother was the best cook in the neighborhood, and she made some extra money to support us by selling food from out of our home. Later, my father opened a small store which was an early version of the 7/11 convenience stores, and I was allowed to run it after school and on weekends. I loved doing this because it gave me a sense of entrepreneurship and a feeling of ownership. The other kids in the area looked up to me because we owned "Mildred's Confectionary Store." That was my father's way of teaching me business methods. None of my siblings were interested, so I had complete freedom to operate this little store at the age of 14.

Although he was not able to complete high school, my father was very intelligent and was recognized as the "brains" in the neighborhood. Whenever someone had legal, business, or personal troubles, they consulted Walter Sinclair Williams, or "Saint Clair", as he was called. He would even go to court with some of our black residents, acting as a sort of grass-roots *amicus curiae* for them. He had an extensive collection of law, medical, and history books as well as many classics of literature which I used to read in the private sanctuary of his bedroom. He gave me my first exposure to black history, which definitely influenced my outlook on the world from adolescence forward.

My mother, on the other hand, was recognized as the community expert on the subjects of beauty, health, fashion, food, and dealing with men. All of the women and young girls came to her for advice. She loved going to occasional events with the higher class black women, who were astounded by what she knew about life and they did not. During the Great Depression she devised unique ways of feeding and clothing us, especially when my father was out of work. When I was at Harvard, she started a company called Mildred's Employment Agency, in which she focused on providing domestic workers for the very wealthy whites of Wilmington including the DuPonts, Carpenters, and others, who just loved "Millie". If they obtained a worker through my mother, they knew they could trust that person. Her little business was very successful and was eventually taken over by two of my sisters. So you may say that we capitalized on the grave unemployment situation by dealing in the employment field, and we were proud of helping a lot of people find some work and to feed themselves. Everyone in the neighborhood knew that Mildred Williams would get you a job if you wanted one. The important lesson here is how my parents

used their creativity to survive and to help others to do so as well, even though society treated us in a discriminatory way.

GOING TO HARVARD

I will bet that not many of my Harvard classmates entered into engagement with Harvard in the rather unusual way that I did. As I continued to make excellent progress at Howard High School, thanks to my dedicated teachers, I came to the attention of some members of the local Harvard Club of Delaware who were looking to find a black student to become the first of his race to attend Harvard College from our state. And so, at the age of 15, I was placed under a sort of surveillance by representatives of the Harvard Club, as I was to find out later. One gentleman in particular, Dr. A. Judson Wells, a chemist with the DuPont Company, checked me out at my track meets, band concerts, performances in plays, and other public appearances. Eventually, he came up to me at a track meet, introduced himself, and told me that Harvard was interested in me. However, he made no promises or commitments to indicate that I was going to be selected by Harvard, nor did I ask for any. When I was 16, I did very well on the College Boards, and based on the excellent scores that I achieved and a 4.0 GPA, I was admitted to several elite schools, including Harvard. Along with admission came a full scholarship. I became a sort of celebrity in the neighborhood and also a curiosity in the larger community, because I was going to be the first Negro student from the state of Delaware admitted to this great school in its illustrious history. I was even featured on the front page of the Wilmington, Delaware Evening Journal newspaper, along with Wilmington High School graduate Bob McGinnis who was also admitted to the Harvard Class of 1957 as the only other student recruited by the Harvard Club. When I reached the campus in September 1953, I received a warm welcome from classmates, one of whom was the late Judge Gordon Martin, Jr., who became a lawyer with the U.S. Justice Department and was the leader in the Federal lawsuit U.S. Justice Department v. Lyden in Mississippi in 1961 which opened up voter registration for blacks in that state and ultimately

helped to get the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed. His book, *Count Them One By One,* is a classic in the annals of civil rights literature. I was also welcomed by Dean of Students John Usher Munro, who was a close friend of my mentor Jud Wells and who later left Harvard to become a civil rights activist in the South.

I checked into my room in Mathews Hall 43 and immediately began to experience living in a dorm with all-white classmates except for Dick Wharton of Boston, another black student who became one of my teammates on the cross country and track teams and a lifelong friend (he was intimidating to me not only because of his athletic prowess and physical stature but also because he was fluent in Latin and German!). My two white roommates were as uncomfortable initially as I was because neither of us had ever been as close as this to a person of the other race, and now we were sleeping in the same room. I soon met some African American upperclass students including Paul Wright, Tom Wilson, Ken Simmons, Nolan Williams, Clifford Alexander, and Paul Brown, and also more of the black students in my class such as Bob Haygood, Vaughn Payne, Charles Martin, and Milt Campbell. Of course, Harvard was not co-ed at that time, although Radcliffe had some black students including Lena Horne's daughter, Gail Horne Jones, and Mary Bunton, who was a talented violinist. (We found out about the Cliffies through the Confy Guide, which was a little pictorial journal that contained descriptions—and ratings—of the ladies of Radcliffe.) The black students congregated occasionally in Tom Wilson's suite at Adams House, where freshman were given information about life at Harvard that was a sort of survival guide. We were told what to avoid, like the racist defrocked priest Father Feeney, whose church was situated right across the street from Adams House, and whose followers were known to attack black students. (I recall an incident in which this group picketed Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie as he and President Pusey walked across Harvard Yard during the Emperor's visit.) Tom's place was where you went to find out about the latest things in jazz and about the social scene. That's how I discovered 558 Mass Ave., a gathering place in Boston for black collegians. I met my lifetime companion GiGi at one of the Saturday night dances held there. I also learned about Harvard's past history of racism, including the fact that several of the past presidents had been slaveholders (Wadsworth, Mather, Holyoke) and that a cross had been burned in front of the black student residence where Max Bond and others were forced

to live until full integration occurred around 1950. The specter of racism connected to slavery still hangs over the University and was recently brought back to our conscious minds and consciences when there was debate about the crest of Harvard Law School which was created as an honor to a Mr. Loyall, who donated the money in the 17th century that was used to build that part of Harvard. His fortune was amassed from slave labor, and just last year, the Harvard Corporation wisely voted to replace the crest with another that was more representative of VERITAS!

I became immersed in my studies and at the end of the first semester, I was on the Dean's List. This enabled me to keep my Harvard Club scholarship, and when I visited the Club at the semester break, Jud Wells and his colleagues were very proud that their "Experiment" was going so well. They were not only impressed with my grades, but also with the fact that I was participating in the social life on campus. My main extracurricular activity was band, which was very strenuous but also gave me great pleasure. One racial incident that occurred was when we were marching through the Princeton campus and some jerk poured a waste basketful of ink on me as we marched under his dorm window. He had targeted me, the only black person in the band. My fellow bandies ran up to his room, pulled him out, and beat the shit out of him.

As time went on, I had more and more opportunities to hone my jazz trumpet-playing skills by playing in a quartet with Walter Chapin on piano, Bob Haygood on bass, and Dick Cottle on drums. Wally Sisson and I occasionally played together, too. The group played gigs on weekends at smokers and dances on campus and at Boston University and other schools. I also sat in on jam sessions at Wally's Paradise, Morley's, the Jazz Workshop, the Stables on Huntington Ave, and Paul's Mall. It was at the Stables where I met Miles Davis, the famous trumpet player that some people called "The Prince of Darkness". I had been sent there on assignment by the Harvard New Jazz Society to try to convince him to come to our campus to perform at Sanders Theater while he was in the area. This tactic had worked before and we had been successful in soliciting groups like the Modern Jazz Quartet. Miles eventually did come to Harvard, and I stayed in touch with him over the years, keeping our friendship alive well past my graduation from medical school and into my years of practicing Cardiology at UCLA when I provided occasional medical care to him as

well as other musicians like drummer Art Blakey. I was often a guest of Miles and his wife Cicely Tyson at his concerts and at dinners and public appearances.

As a freshman, I petitioned to get into world-famous psychologist B.F. Skinner's course on Experimental Psychology, which was designed for upperclassmen. I had felt challenged by a statement made by Professor Pitirim Sorokin that Negroes had no intellectual abilities and that the black race had never accomplished anything except for developing a few boxing champions and musicians. Skinner's course had a reputation of being very difficult, but I handled it well and "aced" it, which led Professor Skinner to summon me to his office in the catacombs of Memorial Hall. So I went there among all the pigeons and rats to meet the great man, who wanted to know how a little black kid from the ghetto was able to do so well in his vaunted course. I assured him that I didn't cheat and that my achievement was due simply to hard work and my determination to show Sorokin and others that blacks could be great scholars if given a chance.

During my freshman year, it seemed that there was always some faculty member who was interested in finding out more about me. One was Professor Gordon Allport, whose blockbuster book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, had a huge impact on me, and was to become an important reference used by the United States Supreme Court in their unanimous 9-0 decision against segregated schools in the Brown v. Board of Education case in 1954.

Another notable academic experience that I had occurred as a result of my taking a graduate-level class at the Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts Mental Health Center in my junior year. The title of my honors thesis that grew out of this course was "Alcohol and d-lysergic acid Diethylamide Tartrate (LSD-25): A Comparison and Method of Classification of their Effects upon Psychic Processes and Interpersonal Relations". My senior tutor was—you guessed it—Dr. Timothy Leary, who later became infamous for his use of LSD, or acid, as it came to be called, to influence students on the Harvard campus and elsewhere in the late 50's and into the 60's to get high and to "turn on, tune in, and drop out". Fortunately, he did not convince me to do so. He was eventually dismissed from the Harvard faculty and went on to become the leader of the psychedelic drug culture during the Beat Generation.

I faced a number of other situations involving prejudice as I continued through Harvard, but they did not derail my ambition to complete my studies. I lived at Kirkland House, which was a fairly liberal place, but I had few close friends. Most of my white classmates seemed to be more comfortable hanging out with guys of their own race, and there was no chance for me to be accepted into one of the tony eating clubs. Meal times were very lonely times, and I ate alone more often than not, although I was considered a popular guy. I didn't get invited to go to beer busts or to watering holes like Cronin's, and I almost never went to any private parties. During my junior year I was interviewed by Marya Mannes, the noted journalist from The *Reporter* magazine, who came to Cambridge specifically to see me and to find out how the "Experiment" was going. In the subsequent article that she wrote, she described me as being relaxed and doing well as a black undergraduate surrounded by a sea of whiteness, and stated that I had adjusted adequately to what was initially an uncomfortable situation. In other words, I had been assimilated into the white Harvard culture. She noted that I had overcome a number of obstacles and had become very accepted by my Caucasian schoolmates, but seemed to be relatively isolated, and not by my own choice. What she didn't appreciate was that I had become an independent, strong black man who was confident of his own identity and was satisfied with the skin that I was in. I had managed to become a part of Harvard and to love my *alma mater* without being swallowed up and brain-washed by its overwhelming influence.

LIFE AFTER HARVARD

I graduated from Harvard with honors in 1957, and went on to medical school at State University of New York (SUNY) Downstate, internship at UC San Francisco, Internal Medicine residency at USC, and Cardiology Fellowship at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, where I subsequently joined the faculty under the great Dr. George Widmer Thorn, who encouraged me to follow my interest in health problems of blacks. He stimulated me to write the first of my nine books, the 900-page *Textbook of Black-Related Diseases*, which was published by McGraw-Hill Book Company in 1975. It was only the second medical textbook ever published by an African American (Dr. William A. Hinton, a professor at Harvard Medical School, was the first to do it). My book was significant in that for the first time it called attention

to differences in the disease process and in the expression of illness between blacks and whites. This has led to the recognition that although we are all one species, there are special characteristics in medical conditions that run along racial and ethnic lines, and doctors must first consider the race and ethnicity of the patient, which may have important diagnostic and therapeutic implications. As is sometimes stated, one size does not fit all, which is the basic principle underlying personalized and precision medicine.

While I was in my Cardiology training at Harvard Medical School, I noted that there were no other black interns, residents, or fellows in any of the 20 hospitals under its control, including Massachusetts General Hospital, Beth Israel, and the Brigham, and further research revealed that there had never been any before me. Even the great heart surgeon Dr. John C. Norman, who had graduated with honors from both Harvard College and Harvard Medical School, was denied a residency in these hospitals. I also found out that the first three black students admitted to Harvard Medical School in 1868 including Martin Robison Delaney were expelled after one year of matriculation by the famous Dean Oliver Wendell Holmes on the grounds that they were incompatible with the white students. While they were there, they had been forced to sit in a sequestered area of the lecture hall during classes which segregated them from their Caucasian classmates. All of this and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. the same year impelled me to start an action in 1968 to recruit black students and postgraduate trainees, and I became basically a civil rights activist attempting to achieve equity and justice for blacks in the Harvard hospital system and ultimately at Tufts and Boston University as well. Along the way, I founded the Central Recruitment Council of Boston Hospitals, which seamlessly and dramatically increased the level of diversity over the next few years, thanks to the concurrence and cooperation of the late Dean Robert Ebert. (He actually got the Council of the Chiefs of all Harvard-affiliated hospitals to grant me and Dr. Vivian Pinn about $30,000 to travel around the country recruiting black and Latino interns and residents. My efforts were rewarded when I was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award in a special testimonial ceremony at Harvard Medical School on April 23, 2004. This was one of the highest points of my life, and I must say that pride had indeed trumped prejudice. I also received the key to the city from the Mayor of my hometown of Wilmington, Delaware in 2016;

this is another distinction of which I am proud. (I wish that abusive policeman from long ago could have been there to witness this.)

Another organization that I founded is the Association of Black Cardiologists, which I started in 1974 to address inequities in cardiovascular care between blacks and whites. One of the things that stimulated me to form this organization was the fact that blacks were being misunderstood by whites in medicine and there were demeaning publications in peer reviewed medical journals stating that black patients did not experience chest pain as whites did because blacks lack the intellectual capacity to perceive pain!

CONCLUSION

At this point, as we prepare to celebrate the 60th anniversary of our graduation from Harvard, I can look back on my time there with the conviction that I extracted a great deal from my beloved school that helped me to become the person that I am today. In the same sense, I believe that I added something of value to Harvard by making it realize that black students not only deserve the opportunity to study there, but also that we have to be respected for our special characteristics and talents. In his book, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), the eminent Harvard alumnus W.E.B. DuBois was the first to study a black community in the United States, and his later essay, "The Talented Tenth" that was included in the book *The Negro Problem* (1903) focused on a mythical subset of blacks whom he felt should to be selected for classic training as an elite cadre of blacks to be leaders in our society. DuBois' approach was in direct contrast to the recommendation enunciated by Booker T. Washington in the Atlanta Compromise that blacks should be obsequious and supportive of and submissive to whites in all respects rather than being confrontational and insistent on those inalienable rights and the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness guaranteed in the Constitution. I may have been an unknowing member of this group. I can point to my career and the numerous accomplishments that have accrued to my credit with the feeling that I have disproved Professor Pitirim Sorokin's pronouncements about the alleged intellectual deficiencies of blacks. I often say that I now have more yesterdays than tomorrows remaining in my life, and that it is important for me not to rest on my laurels but to continue to

push for more positive change in the limited time that I have left. There is still a great deal of prejudice in this country, and the reset of the government on November 8, 2016 does not auger well for improving the situation. From my position as the 117th president of the National Medical Association, the world's largest (50,000 adherents) and oldest (established 1895) medical organization dedicated to improving healthcare delivery for people of color, I pledge to continue fighting for justice and equity in healthcare delivery, and to be a pit bull in this bully pulpit, as it were. I hope to have the opportunity again to elaborate on national TV, as I did when I was interviewed by Barbara Walters et al in 1973 on the iconic TODAY Show, on how important it is for the health and welfare of the nation to eliminate the cultural divide on race and ethnicity. I intend to follow the splendid tradition set by President Barack Obama when he signed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) into law on March 23, 2010, which prompted me to write another book called *Healthcare Disparities at the Crossroads with Healthcare Reform* (Springer, 2011). This historic legislation is in jeopardy of being repealed by the new administration, which will risk the lives and health of over 20 million people who depend on the healthcare coverage that it provides.

Future generations will look back on this time to determine if being black in America has continued to be a condition that incites prejudice as it did for me and my parents, who in the final analysis may be said to have been better than I was because they survived so many more abuses than I did and emerged from their experiences with the utmost dignity. They are my heroes, and whatever I am is completely attributable to their example. I am also confident that President Obama's "audacity of hope" will help us to conquer adversity. Although ill will and prejudice continue to persist in the world, nonetheless, as Dr. King stated, the arc of the universe is long and it eventually curves toward justice. Keeping this in mind, I firmly believe that WE SHALL OVERCOME.