

My White Tribe

by **Vic Sizemore**

On July 7, 2016, I forced myself to watch the video of Alton Sterling's son breaking down and crying, "Daddy," as his mom spoke to reporters about her husband's death at the hands of the Baton Rouge police. The video was heartbreaking, but the endless cataract of online news almost immediately churned it under.

One of my daughter's summer reading assignments for fall semester was Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. Both of her older brothers had read it for English class as well. It was first published in 1945. In an autobiographical sketch, Wright speaks of the "dread of being caught alone upon the streets in white neighborhoods after the sun has set." He says, "While white strangers may be in these neighborhoods trying to get home, they can pass unmolested. But the color of a Negro's skin ... makes him suspect, converts him into a defenseless target." Reading Wright's book, my daughter will get a glimpse into what it was like to be a black boy in the United States seventy years ago.

I never read *Black Boy* in school. In fact, I cannot remember being assigned a single black writer until I chose an African American Literature elective my junior year in college. I was raised in a place that was not only lily-white, but white with a red neck. No black people lived up the Elk River until a woman moved her black husband and mixed-race children into a trailer beside North 119, between Elkview and Herbert Hoover High School in Clendenin when I was young. From passing cars, people hurled slurs and rocks at the children as they tried to play in the yard. Kids laughed about it at school. Eventually someone burned a cross in the trailer's front yard—that was the story going around—and the family moved away. Nonwhite people did not often venture up the Elk River, not willingly.

My world was even more circumscribed than redneck Elk River culture. I was part of a frightened tribe that hid inside the Baptist church and looked with suspicion at every passing fad, television show, and popular song. Everywhere and at all times,

Satan was trying to sneak his subversive message into our homes. We had to be diligent.

White Evangelical Christians, by definition, could not allow nonwhite Christians to join the tribe. They did allow nonwhites to come around for worship and fellowship, within reason, as long as they behaved in an appropriately white-Evangelical way. Acceptable nonwhite Christians—born again and in doctrinal, political, and social agreement with my tribe—fit into two basic groups: black believers, and nonwhite-other-race believers. The only times I ever saw nonwhite-other-race believers up the Elk River was as an object lesson for one missionary or another, a curiosity to marvel over. This was the 1970s.

However, because a born again black family sent their children up the river to Elk Valley Christian School, I became good friends with several from the Black Believers tribe. I played football and soccer with them, chummed with them in the hallways and classrooms. What I didn't understand back then was how difficult it was for Doug, Tammy, Donald, and Steve, riding up the Elk River from Charleston every day on the green EVCS school bus with kids Tammy, in a conversation many years later, called "country ass creekers." Not a single day went by for them without racial taunts from open racists. In addition, there was the continuous stream of microaggressions from us who liked them and meant well.

On a long ride home from a football game in seventh grade, Donald and I sat together in the dark bus, outside lights flashing across our faces. The bus reeked of sweat and diesel, and the plastic bus seat in front of us was cracked and dry. I talked of a job I'd been doing since sixth grade, picking up garbage in the parking lot down the street in Elkview, at the Goody Shop. They paid me seventy-five cents and a milkshake of my choosing. I usually got cherry because it finished with a pile of chopped up maraschino cherries in the bottom, slippery and chewy and sweet enough to make your stomach hurt. Sometimes I brought my brother or a friend to help pick up all the trash, and the shop owners—they were the parents of a former classmate, from my days in public school—would pay us in money and milkshakes. I remember them as kind and generous people.

Donald and I talked of other things, and eventually, because the bus ride from Ohio Valley Christian School was long on those old busses, we eventually fell silent and listened to the cheerleaders harmonizing beautifully, but for far too long, on the *nana nananana* part of Journey's "Loving, Touching, Squeezing."

"If I lived in Elkview," Donald said after a long stretch, "we would do that Goody Shop job together, wouldn't we?"

"Yeah," I said. "We would."

At that point, I felt a rush of deep affection for my friend. However, I knew even then, that life would be dangerous for Donald if he lived up in Elkview. I was not angry or outraged—I had no idea it could be any different—but I was deeply sad for my friend sitting on the bus there beside me.

Looking back, I see the green and white Elk Valley Christian School bus lumbering across the Ohio Valley, hitting I79 South back toward Elkview, West Virginia. Inside, the girls in their green cheerleading culottes, and boys in their grass-stained uniforms, flirt and sneak kisses and touch those secret, off-bounds body parts, just as teenagers have on busses since teenagers have been riding busses, and did on carts or in barns and woods before that, back into prehistory. On this bus, there were these two boys, one black and one white. The white boy was not rich—far from it; his father was a poor Baptist preacher in a poor place—but he had white skin and blue eyes. He had a free pass into a world barred from the black boy, no matter what he did to gain access.

I had the same affection for Steve, Doug, and Tammy that I had for Donald. They were in my core group of friends until I left Elk Valley Christian School trying to get away from oppression of the religious kind. I loved them, but I also I remember hearing white students say things like, "Hey man, who hit you and blacked your face?" and "What's worse than a face full of zits? One *blackhead*."

In 1955, a black boy named Emmett Till from Chicago made the mistake of whistling at a white woman in Mississippi. White men dragged him from his cousin's house in the middle of the night, strung him up in a barn, beat him, and gouged out one of his eyes. He was defiant, cursed the white men who tortured him, so they shot him

dead, tied a seventy-pound fan to his neck with barbed wire, and threw his carcass into the river.

That's what it was like for a black boy in 1955.

In 1958, Liberty University founder Jerry Falwell preached "Segregation or Integration, Which?" In the sermon, he preached, "When God has drawn a line of distinction, we should not attempt to cross that line." He warned that integration "will destroy our race eventually." For shock value, he added, "In one northern city, a pastor friend of mine tells me that a couple of opposite race live next door to his church as man and wife."

In the early nineties, I attended seminary at Liberty University where there were more South Koreans in my classes than African Americans. For all the rebranding, the black community had still not forgotten Falwell's civil rights record. One of the black students was Hiawatha. He educated me. He told me to watch how people reacted to him, and I did, hanging back so their reactions wouldn't be mitigated by the presence of a clean-shaven white guy in a tie. Indeed, people gave him nervous glances in convenience stores. The young white girls at school gave him wide nervous berth in the hallways. I was astonished. Hiawatha shrugged it off in weary resignation.

Hiawatha became president of the graduate student body after the faculty deemed the elected president unfit to serve because he had been divorced. A charismatic speaker, Hiawatha received invitations to preach all over the south, and was eventually extended an offer to come on staff at the seminary after graduation.

We discussed it over lunch one day, and he eventually said to me, "I don't want to be their token black."

"What are you talking about?" I said. "They love you."

"Yeah?" he said, looking straight into my eyes. "Let me try to date one of their daughters."

Recently, after I'd watched the documentary about food deserts called *A Place at the Table*, I was being taxi-dad, driving kids around town. I discovered that a kid I know

and see relatively often is not only poor, but experiences every day what is now euphemistically called “food insecurity.” Not incidentally, the kid is African American.

All three of my kids are musicians and the circles in which they move are as diverse as any you will find in Lynchburg, VA. They have formed friendships with their black peers. It could be heartening to see what appears to be Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream of “little black boys and black girls ... able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

Outside of school, however, things can get awkward fast. The disparity is undeniable—even if it is uncomfortable to acknowledge. One side of town is booming economically due in large part to the torrent of federal financial aid money pouring into nonprofit Liberty University, where Donald Trump recently gave the graduation address. At the same time, Lynchburg’s poverty rate is abysmal—for whites it is nineteen percent, which is over four percent higher than the national average. For blacks in Lynchburg, the poverty rate is thirty percent. According to the City Council’s analysis, the poverty is intergenerational.

Just as it was with Donald and me, these kids are on a path that will likely split along racial lines as they grow into adulthood. While they are reaching an age at which they notice and show discomfort with these inequalities, they also encode poisonous systemic notions about race, wealth, merit, and opportunity.

Take opportunity: My children do not have limitless opportunities—we live on teachers’ salaries—but their family and social situations have placed them on a springboard that, if they choose to use it, will launch them into success. They will have to work hard, but their work will pay off, and there is a safety net if they fail once or twice. Not so for many of their friends on the other side of the racial divide. Where my kids find a springboard, these friends too often find a fence, and behind that a wall.

I get push back from members of my tribe on this. Because they do not want to the *R* label, they discuss this issue carefully. Why do I hesitate even now to use the word, when racism—individual, institutional, and systemic—is such a massive and undeniable problem?

Is racism undeniable? Not in my tribe. I inevitably get some variation on two defensive responses: “You are the one who is racist, because you think black people

need handouts, can't be successful on their own merit," and, "It is not fair to take away what I have earned fair and square and give it to someone else who refuses to work." Race is always close to the surface in these discussions. In an online argument, one of my tribe—a member of my family—wrote to me, "Excuses, blaming whites and one party voting will never allow the African American community to excel. Ditch Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson and make some changes."

The root assumption of both these claims is that most everyone starts with a similar array of opportunities, and some have squandered theirs, or at least not worked quite hard enough. This is simply not the case. In "The Case for Reparations", Ta-Nehisi Coates gets to the point. He writes, that, "America was built on the preferential treatment of white people—395 years of it." It is not ancient history either. We live in an America, "in which black college graduates still suffer higher unemployment rates than white college graduates, and black job applicants without criminal records enjoy roughly the same chance of getting hired as white applicants with criminal records."

I do not want my children growing away from their black friends, but I fear it will happen. I do not want them to grow into the advantaged Monopoly players who will someday run into these childhood friends in line at the movie theater and assume they are better off—which is nearly a statistical certainty—because they are smarter and have worked harder. I do not want their black friends—bright, beautiful, and talented kids—to circumscribe their dreams as experience is teaching them every day that they must.

During the winter of 2014, we were at my parents' house for Christmas. They were both old and feeble. My mother had Alzheimer's, though they had not told us yet, though we could tell she was getting forgetful. My parents are still Fundamentalist Baptists; more topics of discussion are potential sources of conflict now than are not. We sit cringing, waiting for comments about Muslims killing Christians, or gays trying to take away religious liberty. This particular Christmas, making small talk in their living room while we waited for my brother and sister to arrive with their families, dad asked me about my community college teaching.

“You teach a lot of black students?” he asked.

“Yes,” I told him. “I do.” Some of my composition classrooms are over fifty percent black.

“They struggle a lot more than the other students don’t they,” he said. It was not a question.

I went into a monologue about all of the students I teach, the economic and social conditions under which many of them have to cobble together a college education, the challenges they face. He looked at me blankly and nodded. It was clear I was talking to myself.

Flipping through their new Elkview Baptist Church directory, on one of the ministry team pages, the men who run the sound booth stood proudly for their picture. One—a man I had gone to high school with—wore a tee shirt with the Confederate flag emblazoned across his chest. The caption: *If you think this is hate, you need a history lesson.* I pointed it out to my sister. She shook her head.

My mom asked our oldest son Evan about his life, and he talked about school and marching band and his girlfriend. She was interested in the girl, so Evan pulled out his phone to show her a picture. Evan’s girlfriend was in marching band with him. He was a drummer and she was in color guard. She was also Asian. My mom looked hard at the picture and said, “Oh.” She said, “Is she a dark girl?”

He looked at me, his eyes wide, somewhere between bemused and astonished. I shook my head, and he understood. Let it go. How can you possibly call it out every single time? Why would you ruin Christmas by being bristly? Anyway, she’s old, what good would it do?

What good does it ever do? The response I saw from my tribe to the murder of nine black worshipers in their church in Charleston, SC was not encouraging. They were angry and they were outraged—outraged not because nine human beings were dead, but that people were calling for the Confederate flag to come down. People who attended Elk Valley Christian School and were, as I was, friends with Doug, Tammy, Steve and Donald posted Confederate flags to their Facebook pages, just above diatribes and cartoons disparaging President Obama. No mention of the nine dead. I was dumbfounded in the face of it.

As 2015 ended, the news filled with reports that a grand jury had decided not to indict the police officer who gunned down a twelve-year-old boy with a BB gun. He was a big boy, one witness said, and scary. He was a black boy.

In August of 2016, a blistering report from the Justice Department outlined a culture of racial bias in the Baltimore police department after all the officers involved in the death of Freddie Gray were acquitted of any charges. This followed similar reports coming out of Seattle, Chicago, and Ferguson, MO. Members of my white tribe posted videos of police officers pulling over black people and giving them ice cream, and called this evidenced that black people were overreacting, being too sensitive.

I watched the news of Alton Sterling's death at the hands of the police, and wondered what has changed. I saw his boy weeping uncontrollably. I heard him call out, "Daddy." He was a black boy. Summer, 2016.

In 2017, White nationalism has roared into the public square, commandeering the American flag to fly alongside the Confederate flag as symbols of the real—white—America. The concerted efforts at black voter suppression continue, now at the national level led by the President's own executive action. The Attorney General is dismantling the checks on abuses in the criminal justice system and rescinding the previous administration's directive that the Justice Department begin to disengage from the for-profit prison industrial complex. He is ramping up the war on drugs with its racially discriminatory laws. His Justice Department will begin suing colleges and universities, on behalf of white (and Asian) people, over affirmative-action admissions policies. This is what making America great again looks like to my tribe.

Yesterday, up the road from my hometown, in Charlottesville, VA, Richard Spencer led a crowd of white nationalists who carried torches and chanted Nazi slogans. They were protesting the slated removal of a Confederate statue—or maybe it was the Festival of Cultures happening in the same park, which celebrates the rich cultural diversity of the city. It looked for all the world as if they were trying to take the United States back to the time when Richard Wright wrote of not being able to walk in a white neighborhood without fear. Then again, maybe less has changed than I want to believe.

The city council in my town recently held an open community meeting called Poverty to Progress. I attended the breakout session on education where citizens brainstormed ways to help underserved kids in our city meet the many educational challenges they face. My wife attended the housing session, as her teaching and research involves service learning in the poorest downtown neighborhoods.

I volunteer with a nonprofit called WordWorks and we tutor the children in these neighborhoods in language arts and creative writing. I also see my teaching at the community college as a way to work directly for the causes of racial and economic justice. It is embarrassingly little; I could do more.

Because I am white, I could easily disengage. By default, I could move in circles no more diverse than those of my youth up the Elk River. I could still talk a good liberal game at parties, decry the actions of the present regime, and forget all about it on the way home to my white neighborhood where I will sleep without fear. My black friends and acquaintances—my black students—do not have that luxury. I remember what John Stewart said in the wake of the Ferguson unrest. “I guarantee you that every person of color in this country has faced an indignity, from the ridiculous, to the grotesque, to the sometimes fatal,” he said. For them, “race is there and it is a constant. You’re tired of hearing about it? Imagine how fucking exhausting it is living it.”



Vic Sizemore's fiction and nonfiction is published or forthcoming in *StoryQuarterly*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *storySouth*, *Connecticut Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Sou'wester*, *[PANK] Magazine*, *Silk Road Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *Eclectica*, and elsewhere. His fiction has won the New Millennium Writings Award and has been nominated for Best American Nonrequired Reading and two Pushcart Prizes. Sizemore teaches creative writing at Central Virginia Community College.