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Foreword

The Meeting: A Transformational Train Ride Through Race in America and Apartheid in South Africa[‡]

Joseph Karl Grant^{*}

The day was Friday, December 18, 1992, a day which I will never forget. Unlike any other day since, on this very day, I had one of the most unique and memorable experiences in my life. It is so memorable that I am thinking about its impact and writing about it seventeen years later. The experience was a meeting, a chance encounter among strangers, strangers who met only once, never to see or hear one another again. The meeting, however, had a profound effect on him and me.

I was in my sophomore year of college at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Thankfully, the day before I had just completed my last final exam for the first semester of my sophomore year. I remember the class; it was American History: 1945-Present. I got on Amtrak in Providence bound for my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. In New York I had to switch trains at Penn Station in New York City. Once I got on the train heading to Chicago via Cleveland, I was looking at a ten plus hour train ride. I settled into a seat and the conductor came around to check tickets.

“You’re on the wrong car. Move up one car to the Cleveland car,” he told me.

I gathered my bags and moved up one train car. The Cleveland car was full to the brim with passengers, with the exception of one seat. On this last available seat the occupant, a fifty-something-year-old White man, was sitting next to the window, with maps, papers, and assorted items scattered all about the aisle seat.

“Sir, is this seat taken?” I asked him. “Do you mind if I sit here? This is the last seat on this car.” The gentleman sat there silently. There was no response and no movement on his part. We were at an impasse, staring each other down to see who would blink first. By this time, the conductor had entered and saw me standing there.

“Look, there are no more seats left,” he informed the passenger. “Please move your stuff so this gentleman can sit down.”

“Why does he have to sit here next to me?” The White man asked. In breaking his silence, I detected a very deep and distinct accent in his voice.

After much hesitation, reluctance, and deliberation, the White man removed his things and I gladly sat down. About a minute later, the belt on

[‡] The incidents and accounts in the following narrative are true.

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my coat breached a sacred place for all train passengers: It ran afoul of the middle of the seat. The White man politely took the belt buckle and placed it on my side of the seat.

“This is my side!!!” He replied in a mean, unmistakable tone. “Don’t let any more of your items touch me.” Needless to say, I was utterly shocked and surprised by his tone. Again, I heard an accent.

“Where are you from?” I asked him.

“Africa,” he retorted coldly.

“You must be South African,” I replied.

“Yes, of course,” was his response. You know when you silently smile and shake your head in affirmation of something? Well I did just that.

I smiled, and pulled out Steven Ambrose’s *Rise to Globalism* and started to read. He looked on in curiosity, puzzlement, and amazement as I read. I thought to myself, ‘haven’t you ever seen a black man read a book before?’ It is not safe to make assumptions about people and take for granted basic notions. I, like any other educated man, was capable of processing information and formulating thoughts. When people see a person of a different race than themselves they often enter “group think” mode. They impute qualities and characteristics that they associate in their minds about the group to the individual. For all I knew at the time, perhaps he had never seen a Black man read before. Stereotypes among races runs rampant; unless those stereotypes are debunked, sometimes rudely debunked. In Jim Crow Alabama, during my father’s and grandfather’s lifetime, many Whites believed with a fervent passion that Blacks were uneducated and incapable of higher learning. There are a number of parallels between the racial segregation and isolation in the Jim Crow South and Apartheid in South Africa. Maybe — just maybe — as a White South African he judged my intellect in a way that a White Southerner might have judged my grandfather’s fifty or more years before. Was I entering “group think” mode or thinking stereotypically by making this assumption about the White South African? I’ve learned that “group think” mode and stereotypes cut both ways, and I’ve tried to consciously catch my brain from entering this zone akin to the “sleep” mode on a computer. With an open and active mind a great deal can be learned about others and how the world works, or ideally *should* work.

The train pushed forward and brought me closer to my destination. The White man became more curious about this thing he saw a Black man doing — reading. Our common passion for reading and acquiring knowledge sparked something between us. He then began to talk.

“I’ve read this book by Ambrose before,” he said. “Why are you reading it?”

I explained to him that I enjoyed the book and that I was re-reading it to follow up on a class where it had been assigned reading. I had a number of other books in my book bag. He started to notice the other titles I had: *Essence of Decision* by Graham Allison, Homer’s *Odyssey*, Voltaire’s *Candide*, Platos’ *Trial of Socrates*, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, and Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, etc. The look on his face revealed his inner soul and thoughts — sometimes our faces and reactions give our deepest thoughts away. I explained to him that I just

completed my sophomore year at Brown University and was headed home for Christmas break. He remarked about Brown's status as an Ivy League institution, and we started to talk about the books I was reading. Interestingly, he had read many of them. Reading opened a door for us to talk about life. He told me that he was traveling through America on an unlimited Amtrak rail pass to see the beauty of the country firsthand. He was excited about seeing new parts of America for the first time.

We talked about geography, current events, politics, and world history. The conversation drew on for hours and hours. I asked about South African politics, and most specifically Apartheid. My sister's boyfriend's parent's had recently moved to South Africa from The Netherlands. I was well-versed on South African politics. This conversation on race got a little uncomfortable for him.

"My people were in South Africa first." I probed a little deeper.

"Are you referring to the Great Trek?" I asked him. "Oh, you mean the Voortrekkers right?" Yes, he was again floored that I knew something about a watershed moment in South African Boer history. Poor man!!! First, a Black man who could read. Now, a Black man who knows obscure facts and foundational history about the White man's early colonial push to segregate the races and reign dominant over others in their own lands. Surely, a Black man who knows too much for his own good. I refuted his contention with an anthropological response.

"No way!" I said. "Australopithecus Afarensis were found in Hadar, Ethiopia. Humans originated in Africa and fanned out from there. Africans were in South Africa thousands of years before Boers or other Whites. Let's not be ridiculous. I just don't buy your argument or assessment of facts."

"You do know who Lucy was, right?" Reluctantly, after much debate and cajoling on my part he accepted inevitable defeat and agreed with my scientific argument.

"Yes, I guess you're right," he said. Wow, the making of a future lawyer and debater.

Fresh off my scientific victory, I turned the conversation directly to race and Apartheid again. I could not let the opportunity to have a White South African explain Apartheid to me slip away.

"So, why do White South African's practice Apartheid?" I asked him.

He searched long and hard for reasons and answers. Many I had heard before. He explained to me the perspective he had always been taught and socialized to believe: Blacks were just plain inferior. I began to see what I had always been told: Racism is a learned response or condition. People act and interact as they are socialized. I probed deeper and deeper. He kept coming up with all the usual explanations: "Whites are superior. We were intended to rule and be on top."

"Have you really spent any meaningful time around Blacks?" I asked him. He admitted he had not.

“I was reluctant and did not want you to sit next to me because I’ve never sat next to a Black person on public transportation before, and I’m in my fifties!” I could sense his unease and discomfort in making this admission.

“Blacks have always been my servants,” he explained. “This is the way things have always been in my country.” South African Apartheid kept him from interacting with a Black person on a deeper intellectual level. A change was in the works. Dialogue and discussion began to chisel away at years of ignorance, misconception, and misperception.

Still, as far as I was concerned, we could not leave our discussion of Apartheid. I spoke about Nelson Mandela’s release from prison.

“Mandela is one of the most powerful men living,” I said. “To survive twenty-seven years on Robben Island, and to emerge with no visible anger and animosity: what a man for the age!”

“F.W. de Klerk’s courage and political pragmatism is remarkable in light of the opposition and flack he took from his own National Party,” I told him. I commented on a recent referendum taken by the White South African community, which had approved by over seventy percent the continuation of political reforms. This really surprised him.

“How do you know about the Referendum?” He was astonished that I knew something about South African politics, let alone so much. My knowledge of current events represented a triple play of sorts. Again, poor White man!!! First, a Black man who could read. Second, a Black man who could discuss and even knew the word “Voortrekker,” and one who could use it in a sentence with “*Australopithecus Afarensis*.” Third, a Black man who knew about South African current events and Apartheid. A veritable trifecta in one train ride. Perhaps, I had shattered too many stereotypes and myths for one White man, all in one chance meeting on a train.

I opened up to him about America’s own long experience with Apartheid in a sense — our demonic and inhumane Jim Crow past. I told him stories about my parents who grew up in rural Alabama during the Great Depression under the weight of Jim Crow. We talked about how they were denied public accommodations, and their struggles to obtain a higher education for themselves, and their children. We talked about my family’s journey North to construct a better life. In general, we talked about the struggles of Black Americans to achieve a level of equality under law, and treatment as human beings in America, the land of our birth. We talked about the struggles and resolve of South African Blacks, and the parallels I saw in their struggle to the struggle of Blacks in America.

As this train ride progressed something remarkable was taking place. The White man, who didn’t want me to sit down next to him because I was Black, was undergoing a transformation right before my eyes. I, a mere *Kaffir* in his mind, an inferior social class in South Africa, was emerging in his reality and presence as a human being, a person with breath, emotions, intellect, purpose, place, and humanity.

“Joseph, I have some cookies, would you like to share them with me?” He asked me. Wait, just hours ago you were the same White man who didn’t want the belt on my coat to touch your side of the seat because I was

Black!!! Conspiracy theories began to race through my mind. I thought to myself: huh, are these cookies poisoned? I guess “group think” mode was setting in on me. In a few short hours, on a train ride, in an unexpected meeting, something that could have otherwise taken years to occur had taken place. Two human beings from different races and cultural perspectives recognized their mutual commonality and moved beyond race in America and Apartheid in South Africa.

Hours melted away. One thing, however, was certain: all good train rides must come to an end. The parties to any productive and insightful meeting must inevitably part company. My journey ended early the next morning in Cleveland, Ohio. I said my goodbyes to the South African.

“Joseph, please let me help you with your bags,” he said as I rose and he did so. As we walked to the door of the train he broke down in tears. He hugged me and only a few simple words were exchanged.

“Joseph, thank you!!! You have changed my life. This was the most amazing and enlightening experience I’ve had in my lifetime. I will never think about people the same again. Everything I was taught was wrong.”

“You too have changed my life,” I replied. “I’ve enjoyed meeting you!!!” We shook hands and parted ways forever. Our meeting was at an end.

I often wonder what ever became of the South African. I wonder if he truly looks back on our conversation, and our chance meeting on a train seventeen years ago with profound awe and remembrance as I do.

Who would have known what an Amtrak ride could do for race relations among citizens of different countries and cultures? Indeed, this was a transformative ride through the intersection of race in America and Apartheid in South Africa that taught me a great deal about myself and how we each in unexpected and strange ways have the ability to transform and redirect the lives of others. There are lessons to be learned. One salient point I took away from this experience is that if we dialogue with each other we can break down barriers of race, class, and socio-economic status that keep us apart. Human understanding comes through dialogue and discourse. What those lessons are for you in this story, I do not know. I hope that you can glean something from my story, transform your life, and hopefully transform the lives of others.

Maybe, the lesson for you is to ride a train. You might meet someone and find humanity together that will transcend your respective skin colors, cultures, or nationalities. Finally, there is one simple lesson — ride more trains, because you never know where those tracks might take you or who you might meet along the journey.