Reflections and Position Statement
- FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE -

IT WAS GOING TO BE A GOOD DAY

I stood there so proud. My seersucker apple green dress matched the color of the budding spring leaves on the sycamore trees surrounding the schoolyard. With my brand new white Keds tennis shoes and bobby socks—the kind with the delicate lace carefully sewn on the border—I was so ready for the school bell to ring and for me to go inside and start a new day of learning. I liked school. I liked seeing the new vocabulary words and arithmetic problems the teacher wrote daily on the blackboard. I liked playing with the other children. I liked my classmates. I liked sitting at the small wooden desk with my construction paper name tag taped to the front. Yes, this was going to be a good day. As we waited for the bell to ring, you could hear the gleeful sounds that children make when they are getting in those last moments of play before school starts. But then, it happened.

A SHOCKING ENCOUNTER

“The Twins,” a sibling duo of red-haired girls, walked up to me and stared with an intensity I hadn’t experienced before. I sensed danger. They were popular children. They wore their persimmon-hued hair in spiral ringlets. Everyone made a big fuss about the twins, including the teacher. The taller twin leaned into my face and asked, “Are you the same color all over, or is just your face brown?”

Being African American all my life, I hadn’t given it much thought, so I hesitated in my response. The other twin wouldn’t wait for an answer. She, like an inquisitive scientist, matter-of-factly lifted up my green dress—baring my undies and everything else—to take a look for herself and solve the mystery. “Yep, she’s brown all over!” I peeked down at myself to see if there was something wrong. The taller twin exclaimed, “Ugh, that’s terrible! I feel sorry for you being colored like that all over!”

With the reflex of a panther, I pulled my dress down and yelled, “Stop!” The teacher turned in our direction to see what all the commotion was about. The scientist twin let out a yelp, “Teacher, Marcia is being bad!” The taller twin pushed me, and I pushed back with all the force a six-year-old could muster. The taller twin fell to the ground. The approaching teacher snatched me by the arm. Digging her red-painted fingernails in my skin, she hurried me off of the schoolyard. I can still remember the rose-scented perfume she wore. She dragged me inside to the classroom and shoved me into the chair in “the corner”. It was the corner of shame. I sat there trembling, frightened beyond measure, and angrier than I had ever been. The teacher pointed one of those red-painted fingers at me and said, “You’ll sit here until you can act like a human being!” I felt sick. My nose began to bleed. I threw up on the freshly polished hardwood floor.

“I want my Mother,” I cried. “I want to call my Mother now!” The teacher became really angry. “No! You can’t call your mother! So what, tell your mother. What can she do to me?”
The teacher spent a few more moments scolding me and then instructed me to go to the lavatory and clean myself up. I looked in that bathroom mirror for what seemed like hours. What had I done so wrong? Why didn’t the teacher see the red-haired twins as being “bad”?

**A HARD CHILDHOOD REALITY**

At the tender age of six, I had experienced my first bout with racism--individual and systemic. I had long ago tucked that dreadful day into the repressed corners of my memory. It resurfaced as I watched the video of George Floyd crying out for his mother as the breath of life escaped his body. I felt the same nausea I felt that horrible day on the schoolyard.

The onslaught of racism begins for African American children early in life and continues for a lifetime. Research has shown that by the age of four, minority children learn, either through direct experiences or vicariously, that they are “different” --and different in a negative way. Society, printed and visual media, the school system, and yes, the criminal justice system, all reinforce the legitimacy of white supremacy and minority oppression. African American men are targeted particularly hard. Little black boys, entering 4th-grade classrooms move from being perceived as children to being perceived as men—men to be controlled, dominated.

African American women are marginalized in unique stereotypical ways. Black women are perceived as being emotionally and physically strong, resilient, and even masculine, so they can “handle” direct and systemic racist assaults. As one white colleague once told me, “You are used to it. Suck it up and move on.”

**NEED FOR CHANGE**

The events of the last few weeks reinforce what too many of us already know. African Americans live in a constant state of “Maafa”. Maafa is the denial of African Americans’ humanity and the right to exist. It is perpetual and systemic racism aimed at the physical, emotional, and spiritual destruction of African people. Living in a state of Maafa is living in a state of pain and suffering beyond human convention and comprehension. In other words, the question is not if something will happen to me, but when something will happen to me and how severe will it be?

What we are experiencing is Maafa. So, what is the solution? The answers are numerous and beyond individual or even organizational attempts. We do know what can be done immediately. We must envelop our children more than ever with unconditional love and support and the reassurance that we, as adults, can and will protect them. We must condemn racism in all its forms in both words and actions. Don’t be a closet warrior for justice.

There will be many attempts at resolving the issue of racism in America. Yes, we can develop strategies and policies, and even change laws. However, until we acknowledge that racism is a founding principle and ingrained in the fabric of the culture of the United States, little if any progress can be made. But progress is possible. We can and must do better. NEED stands with our community and our nation to facilitate that progress.

Peace and Grace to all those lost to racism. We will not forget you and we will honor the spirit of your memory through our continued fight for justice and equality.

Yours in the struggle,

Marcia M. Sturdivant
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