

"But There Aren't Enough Of You"

William Van Til

During the summer, my wife and I had guests for ten days at our home on the lake near Terre Haute. Our son Jon and our daughter-in-law Sally, both sociologists, visited us while on their way to Berkeley with the first draft of Jon's doctoral dissertation. They brought with them Julie. Julie had been a student in a college sociology class which Sally had taught. Jon and Sally wanted Julie to experience Indiana.

Julie is black. She was born 27 years ago in rural North Carolina. She grew up in a Philadelphia ghetto. Though poor, she managed to go to college. In the northern Negro college from which she graduated this year, she became a leader among the campus activists protesting inadequate facilities and instruction, inadequate professors and administrators. For instance, her group posted a list of professors to be fired.

She wears colorful African garb and she is studying Frantz Fanon. She is a black activist who believes in and works for black power. Home for her is the ghetto where, when the police say to mobs, "Go home," the mobs say, "We are home, Whitey."

The Van Tils are white. I was born an incredible number of years ago in New York. I worked my way through college. In my college, I went to classes, studied my books, wrote my papers, and joined relatively mild demonstrations. I now belong to the American Association of University Professors which believes that nobody should post lists of professors to be fired.

I wear conventional clothes (I think the word is "square") and, though I've read Frantz Fanon, I much prefer John Dewey. I'm a white liberal and I have worked for racial integration in both North and South. I live in a comfortable home in the country on a lake and sociologists call me upper-middle class or lower-upper class.

My son, the sociologist, has a sharp eye for such differences. He said, "It's not just one gap, Dad. It's four. The gaps between you and Julie are racial, social class, ideological, and generation."

However, Julie didn't know how to dive, or float, or paddle a boat or play ping pong. We taught her and she learned fast. She experienced our acre of Indiana. Once, floating on her back, she said contentedly, "This is a hallelujah time."

My wife and I had our customary vigorous dialogues across the generation gap with son Jon and daughter-in-law Sally. But as Negro-white relationships today, Julie and the older Van Tils abided by an unspoken agreement that we would not war against each other.

Julie and the older Van Tils could not cry "Peace!" For there is no peace in this tortured and unhappy time in race relationships. But we could at least call a truce. We could at least experience each other, differ on minor social customs, and size each other up as separate human beings viewed from across the gaps.

As Julie left, I couldn't resist one truce violation. I said, "Tell your friends, Julie, that you've been the guest of old-fashioned white liberals who hate and reject all forms of segregation whether by whites or blacks, and who still believe in integration."

Julie couldn't resist a truce violation either. She said, "But there aren't enough of you."

I have often thought about her response. Don't misinterpret it; she intended no facile compliment to the effect that "you are so wonderful and let's hope others will behave and act similarly." Instead, she was reporting what she saw as a brutal and raw and awful fact of life in the United States of America today. "But there aren't enough of you." And since there aren't enough of you whites who believe in and act for integration, you're going to get the only thing Whitey can understand or be moved by--black power in its various forms.

I think you are right, Julie, when you say, "But there' aren't enough of you." The history of the United States as long ago as Jamestown and as recently as the Supreme Court decision of 1954 proves that you are right. We had our chance to build a society in which there was only one race, the human race, a society which so took for granted integration that the use of the word would be unnecessary. And we muffed the chance. Read the headlines.

But there are many things wrong with your strategy, Julie. One crucial flaw is that there aren't enough of you, either. The black militants are a minority within a minority. Should they espouse a racist and segregationist version of black power, they will cut themselves off from whites who once fought side-by-side with Negroes for civil rights. Thus, they will lose potential allies for human improvement and with them the coalition which realistically is the only hope for Negro America, and for that matter, for white America. Meanwhile, the repression which seems to the unreflective white the only recourse moves ominously nearer.

Across those racial, social class, ideological, and generation gaps, those of us who are black and those of us who are white desperately need each other.

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