



Video Story Transcript

Learning Long Division and White Superiority from My Sweet Third Grade Teacher

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zE0D23bQDQ>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is La'Ron Williams and I want to share with you just a tiny, little piece of a much larger story that I wrote about 12 years ago. It was a story examining the role that race played in shaping the structure of the community in which I lived. The original story is about 55 minutes long but this is, like I said, just a tiny, little piece so I hope you'll stay with me through the whole thing.

A long, long time ago, way back when I was growing up, there was a story that I used to hear over and over and over again about the way that America thought of itself. Now, it didn't come as a straight-out narrative. It came to me in tiny, little snippets and you'll probably recognize some of these. Things like, "land of the free and home of the brave," or "with liberty and justice for all," or "we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." That kind of thing. And taken in the aggregate, taken together, they constitute a kind of a narrative that says that this country is free and very equal and equitable place. And so, I grew up with the notion that that it should be like that.

But when I was a boy, way back when I was born in 1951. Jim Crow segregation was still the law. It was very, very obvious and very, very thorough in some places like Georgia where my father was from. And in some places like Flint where I was from, Flint, Michigan, it was not so obvious. Not so brutal, not so open but it was there, because it was everywhere. It was all over the country. So, I'm one of those people who remembers drinking from the segregated drinking fountain, for example, or having to sit in the balcony of the segregated movie theater, or having to swim on one side of the segregated swimming pool. And I, especially, remember, one time when my family took a trip to Washington D.C. and we weren't allowed to eat in a restaurant. We

were greeted at the door by a man who simply, very matter of factly, told us that we couldn't eat there because they didn't "serve Negroes." And I remember my brother, as we walked away, said, "That's okay, because we don't eat them."

I didn't read about those things in books. I **remember** those things. They constitute a part of my upbringing, a part of my lived experience. And you may notice that my lived experience didn't match the stories that I was told about the way this country was. And so, what that meant was, that, that I was kind of like I was two people. There was the person who really, really wanted to be free and equal and to believe the stories I was being told. And there was the person who knew that it was a lie. And these guys didn't always trade places. I mean, sometimes I would be both of those guys at the same time.

Well, the fall of 1959 was when I went into third grade and my teacher that year was a woman named Mrs. Paris. Now that's not her real name but for story purposes, Mrs. Paris was my third-grade teacher. And at the school that I went to, most of the teachers were black. Most of the students were black. It was, it was a largely African-American school and Mrs. Paris was the first white teacher that I had ever had. So, when I walked in the door, I felt a sense of trepidation. I mean, 'cause, because I didn't know what she might be like. She might be like that guy who told us we couldn't eat in the restaurant. So, I was ready for anything but my heart was also open because I was two people and one of them wanted to believe that things could be fair.

Well, as the year went on, I learned that Mrs. Paris really was a pretty good teacher. She taught us a lot of things and she always had a smile on her face and I like that piece of it. And I love the fact that she, she loved to sing. She was always singing songs in class. She taught us long division. She taught us how to say the Pledge of Allegiance, every, single day. She was a very loving and kind teacher who never, ever, ever gave up on any of her students, even those students that were considered slow. She would take special time with them to make sure they caught on with all the lessons.

Well, now, there was one time when the entire class was working on painting, a huge banner mural. And Mrs. Paris had taped this kind of really thick butcher paper up all around, all the walls of the room. And each student was assigned a part of the butcher paper to draw on. And so, we had to draw our part of the painting before we started painting. Now, I was a pretty good artist and so I finished my part of the banner before anybody else. So, Mrs. Paris came over and she gave me a number of different cups of paint that she had mixed up beforehand. And she'd labeled all of these cups.

So, I picked up one of the cups of paint and I started to paint one of the people in my portion of the mural but I didn't get very far because one of my few white classmates standing right next to me, suddenly became, like, super exasperated. She put her hands on her hips, (*disapproving breathing*), and she's going like this, (*exasperated look*), and only in a way that only a 8 year old kid can do. And I thought she was out of her mind. What's going on with you? What are you doing? And, and she looked at me and she says, "You're not supposed to use brown to color history people."

I had no idea what she meant. I just looked at her and I started to say something. But before I could say anything. She called the teacher over. She said, "Mrs. Paris, he's using the wrong color."

I can almost hear all the heads turn of all my fellow students as they looked to watch Mrs. Paris walk over. Mrs. Paris walked over, she reached down, and she took the cup of paint that I've been using. She picked up another cup of paint and just handed it to me. And then she walked away without saying a word. So, I took a cup of pain and I turned it around and I looked at it and the label said, "flesh." Now, I mean, it's not like I didn't know what flesh colored paint was. I had used flesh colored paints and flesh colored crayons hundreds of times before that. I mean, I didn't mind using them. I knew it wasn't the color of my flesh but it was the

color of a lot of people. It was the color of Mrs. Paris, basically, and my classmates, and people that I admired on TV, like the whole cast of “Father Knows Best” and “Ozzie and Harriet” and I didn't mind using it. It's, it's just that this time, with this teacher, for the first time, I became aware of how bad I felt not to use that color.

Well, as the year progressed, there were a lot of incidents like that. I mean, times when Mrs. Paris would be talking about something and my white classmates seemed to know what she meant even in advance. Times when we would sing songs from our school songbook and all the white students seemed to know all the words in advance. I mean, at home I sang songs by The Drifters and the Shirelles and pop tunes like that. And sometimes spiritual songs and gospel tunes. And I knew all those words by heart and half of them I still know. But somehow, none of those stories or songs ever seemed to appear in my school books. I mean, it's not that I was upset that I didn't know the school stuff sometimes. It's just that for the first time, with this teacher, I became aware of how bad I felt that they did know it.

I didn't have the words to describe it back then but I know now that, without meaning to, without even trying to, Mrs. Paris was teaching her black students to feel ashamed of the way that they did things. I mean, she was a good teacher and there was no malice in her heart. But she was teaching us to be ashamed. Just by using the school books and the school curriculum in the way that it was intended, she was teaching her black students shame. But there was something else that was going on too. Because at the same time that we were learning shame, she was teaching a lesson to the white students. She was teaching them superiority. Only none of us thought of it that way. I didn't. Mrs. Paris didn't. My classmates didn't. It had been going on all our lives. But to them, to me, to her, to all of us, it was just normal, just standard, just the way it was, kind of like TV, a kind of an official story.

It was because of TV, it was because of shows like, “Father Knows Best,” that I knew what the suburbs looked like. It was because of programs like, “The Lone Ranger” that I knew what Indians, “How!” talked like. TV and Mrs. Paris and the movies and all kinds of things, the school books, gave me a kind of standard that was rooted in white culture, rooted in a white European way of thinking about things. But without naming it, without even talking about it, it was just considered standard. But in a way, I was lucky because when it came to what Mrs. Paris and the movies and the books and things had to say about being African-American, I knew that it didn't even come close to matching the reality that I was living.

But what if I had been one of my white classmates? What if that paint that Mrs. Paris mixed up, at least came close to matching the color that I was? What if a Johnson's Band-Aid didn't stand out like a glaring beacon of mis-coloration whenever I stuck it, whenever I stuck it on my arm? What if everything around me told me that I was the standard, that I was just normal, just the way things should be? And what if everything around me reinforced that notion? What if I lived in a community where practically everybody looked like me and I never even heard a different point of view?

You know, crayon manufacturers no longer make a crayon that they call flesh but there are pantyhose that are called “nude.” And the color of the nude pantyhose is the same color that the flesh colored crayon used to be. I wonder whose nude are they talking about?

There, there's also a color of makeup that's called blush. It's the same color that the flesh colored crayon used to be only it's a little bit redder. And there's a color of makeup that's called suntan. It's the same color that the flesh colored crayon used to be only it's a little bit brown there. So, I'm left to think, in what ways is the flesh colored crayon still with us? In what ways do you notice that we still live surrounded by flesh colored crayons?

