

MY SISTER'S SLIPPER

by

Jim Wrich

January 31st is one of those special dates that goes unnoticed by most Americans. Nevertheless, few dates on my calendar surpass this one in its importance. For it was on this day in a small Georgia town in 1919 that a baby boy was born to Mallie and Jerry Robinson. He grew up to change the racial landscape in America and set the stage for what was to become the Civil Rights movement in this country.

Most people know bits and pieces of the story of Jackie Robinson and the brutal racists attacks he endured while breaking the color line in major league baseball. And as I write this, I realize the risk of being pigeon-holed with those who overuse tired sports metaphors. But the lessons of Jackie Robinson's life transcend sports. He didn't simply play baseball. He went to work each day, performed exceptionally, and was still largely unwanted, abused and harassed because of the color of his skin.

Regardless, he had a special place in the hearts of my buddies and me when we were kids playing ball in the streets of St. Paul's East Side in the late 1940's. Even though there wasn't a single African American student in any of the schools we attended, K through 12 we were all Dodgers fans by virtue of our home town team, the St. Paul Saints, being a Dodgers' farm club. Great talents came through St. Paul on their way to stardom at Brooklyn. The most famous was Roy Campanella, whom we initially thought was just one more in a long line of great Italian ball players.

After years of lackluster performance, the 1946 Dodgers almost won the National League pennant, loosing to St. Louis on the last day of the season. They hadn't been in the World Series during our brief lifetimes and, like Chicago Cubs fans today, each Fall we looked forward to "next year." A contemporary therapist who isn't a baseball fanatic might have diagnosed us as delusional, suffering from seasonal affective disorder, or both.

The summer of 1947 was different. It marked a watershed period as Robinson joined Brooklyn and Campanella broke the color line in the American Association, the league where the Saints played. Though young -- ages 9 to 12 -- we knew our baseball. We imitated the super stars of the day, borrowing their names, playing their positions, ripping our baggy coveralls on the asphalt as we slid into the bases. We dreamed that some day we might walk in their shoes. With Jackie Robinson, we knew the Dodgers could win the pennant that year and when they did, he became our hero.

As the years passed I learned how difficult life had been for Robinson and how, in the face of abuse I could never withstand, he turned the other cheek. He was the National League's first Rookie of the Year. Later he was voted Most Valuable Player, was a batting champion and became the performance and spiritual leader of his team, taking it to four pennants and a World Series Championship. An exciting and fearless competitor, attendance soared wherever he played.

Everyone associated with major league baseball made money because of him. Yet, he could not buy a home where he wanted. He couldn't get promoted to a major league managerial position when he retired as a player. He couldn't move politicians to get serious about the plight of minorities and the tragic waste of talent wrought by racism, though some gave it lip service. By the time he died at age 53, all major league teams had integrated, mainly out of economic necessity when it became apparent they would be mired in mediocrity without black players. But baseball's management ranks and the rest of society remained essentially unmoved. Despite his success the sad fact is that his struggle was to mirror a basic racist attitude towards black men and other minorities that has persisted like cancer in the blood stream of America throughout the balance of the 20th century, their accomplishments notwithstanding. Achievement on one level does not open doors at the next level for minorities the way it has for my white brothers and me.

Today in Chicago and other major cities, minority men my age walk the streets unemployed while white men such as I, who started with no more talent, enjoy privileges we scarcely even think about. Studies show that black men regardless of ability have far greater difficulty getting an equal education, a job or a promotion. They pay more for automobiles, the loans to finance them and the policies to insure them. They have greater difficulty getting home mortgages or financing for business ventures. Routine encounters with police are often unjustified and they are not usually given the same benefit of the doubt as white men.

But like many of the most serious diseases, prejudice if left untreated, cannot be contained -- it always metastasizes. Chauvinism towards women in general mimics much of what black men have endured while having unique features of its own. The fundamental lack of respect, the restricted access, the lower wages, and the stereotyping are ongoing injustices women share with all who are not part of the white male dominant group. Whether married or a single parent, women often find that pursuing a professional career does not replace traditional female responsibilities and this can dampen dreams of successfully fulfilling either role. More subtle examples can be found in business. When I as a white man question a management decision or the terms of an agreement it is usually viewed as negotiating. A woman or black man on the other hand, is often seen as pushy, defiant or ignorant.

Women of color have borne even greater burdens unknown to most of the rest of us. As a white male, it would be impossible to even begin to understand this except for the love I have known from my own wife and daughters. When I hurt, they hurt, too -- sometimes more. As black men get passed-over on the job, are ignored by sales clerks, earn hundreds of thousands of dollars less in their lifetimes and ultimately die ten years earlier than white men, the women in their lives -- mothers, sisters, daughters, wives or sweethearts -- suffer the silent, deep pain known only to those who witness the spirit of someone they love being slowly consumed by sinister forces over which they have no power. In addition to the dual biases they suffer as both minorities and women, society's abuse of minority men punishes them further. Unfortunately, the roots of this brand of prejudice run deep in our history and culture.

Native American women, whose mothers and grandmothers at places like Wounded Knee and Taos Pueblo watched in horror as the U.S. Cavalry massacred their men and children, American Japanese women whose mothers were separated from their husbands and children while being swept into internment camps in California during WW II and Hispanic women today who fear for their children's future as political demagoguery breeds bigoted public policies, all share a legacy of pain from birth with their African American sisters. They all live with the knowledge that their children or husbands, whatever their abilities and effort, will be held back, mistreated and maybe killed in the

street. For many their primary hope is not that their sons will attend college after high school but that they will still be alive. How does anyone raise a child or encourage a loved one to give life his best under such circumstances? Gender aside, I cannot imagine what it would be like to wear my sisters' slippers.

One would wish that our society's racial and cultural prejudice and the pain it wrecks was a thing of the past. For many, denial has transformed that wish into a belief that ignores reality and blames the victims. In truth when racial minorities are combined with gay men, lesbians and virtually all women, a significant majority of the population has been seriously victimized by prejudice.

As EAP professionals we may want to believe that our field has been largely spared, but it has not. When a dedicated professional woman of color who has spent most of her life taking care of others is forced to exert extraordinary effort to maintain her professionalism in the face of racist remarks of patients she is serving and cannot say anything to anyone for fear *she* will be blamed, our field is not spared. When minority professionals working for external EAP providers are by-passed for accounts they are well qualified to handle due to fear that the potential prejudice of the customer will jeopardize corporate income, our field is not spared. When one white EAP professional quietly complains to another, with no basis in fact, that "... there really aren't many "good" minority therapists...", our field is not spared. When the preponderance of minority EAPA members work either for unions or are in private practice, one wonders if the stain of prejudice seen in the work world of Baseball 50 years ago hasn't soiled us today, our practiced rationalizations notwithstanding. Like addiction, racial and gender prejudice is a disease characterized by denial. And none of us is immune. But it can be treated if we are willing.

As we head towards a new millennium, valuing and embracing cultural and ethnic diversity while fighting prejudice is the most important issue the EAP field can undertake. In my opinion, it ranks with our early struggles to get alcoholism recognized as a disease and to adopt the EAP Broad Brush approach for helping people. It engenders hope. We can change the American workplace if we are first willing to look at ourselves and change.

I am proud that EAPA is committed to addressing this issue. It is an honor to work with and learn from my colleagues in the Northeastern Illinois Chapter, which has taken this on as a major project. Years of involvement with recovering brothers of color has shown me the invidious effect racism can have on the recovery process. But during the past year I have come to know more intimately the struggles of my professional brothers and sisters -- straight and gay, with various shades, hues and ethnicities. I am in awe of their courage, strength, generosity and spiritual depth. They have given me a marvelous gift -- their heroism -- to be placed along side that of my boyhood idols.

My brother of color is a larger hero to me today than he was in my youth. But thoughts of walking in his shoes are a faded childhood dream, marred by the reality of his plight. As for my sister's slipper, I never had any illusions about that. All I can do is say, "Thank you for your gift." It is more than I could ever have earned. It nourishes my soul. I will try to pass it on. I will stand up for you.

END.

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