Daddy, Me, Trayvon, and "The Talk"

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By Roger Witherspoon

I'd never seen Mom cry before.

Daddy had said "go over to the chair. We have to talk." And I wondered what I'd done wrong. This wasn't going to be one of our daily talks, the highlight of a six-year-old's day when Dad would sit in the big armchair, hoist me onto his lap and pick a story out of the newspaper or Ebony magazine. He'd then help me read it and tell me about the ongoing struggle for justice for us Negroes, and how the law would one day work in our favor when we had Negro judges and lawyers and jurors.

Daddy was going to night school and hoped to become a lawyer and fight for justice for all of us. But it was 1955 and in New York, only the top two blacks who passed the bar exam were admitted to the bar. He'd "failed" the bar exam that year with a score of 92 since he was fourth among the blacks who took the state-wide test. It would be another year before he was in the top two and accepted through the state's legal quota.

But this talk wasn't about any of the usual topics. I knew it was different when Mom handed him a wrinkled copy of *Jet Magazine*, started crying and fairly ran from the room.

"What's the matter with Mom?" I asked.

"She thinks you're too young to know about a danger facing Negro men and older boys," Dad stated. "But if I don't tell you now, you may not get a chance to grow up."

He opened *Jet* and, together, we looked at the story and photos of 14-year-old Emmett Till. It was an era when "eyeball rape" was a capital offense for black men in the South and Till, who had a lisp, was accused of whistling at a white woman in a hardware store. Two white men kidnapped him, tortured him to death, tied a fan around his neck with barbed wire and threw the body in the Tallahatchie River. They were acquitted in a brief trial with an all-white judge and jury that was punctuated with jokes about the "crazy nigger" who stole a fan and drowned while trying to swim away with it.

His mother wanted the world to see what racist, grown white men could do to a black child. So Daddy showed me: the bloated body; the empty eye socket where they had gouged out an eye so he'd never look at another white woman; the battered face and missing teeth. And he quietly explained that there were a lot of white men who would like to do that to Negro men and older boys, particularly if they thought the man or boy was too "proud" and looked them in the eye as if they were equal.

"Does that mean I should look down when I see white men?" I asked.

"No," said Dad emphatically. "No one is better than you except God. Some whites just don't want to believe that. Remember that the police are not your friend. If you are in trouble, and there are no other Negroes around, look for a Jew. They're the only ones who may understand and help."

I knew his warning didn't apply to all white men. My great grandfather, Walker Elliot Smith, had fought with the Pennsylvania Cavalry in the Civil War and always reminded his sons that there were whites fighting and dying on both sides of that conflict – and most of them were fighting *with* him.

In 1896 when Reconstruction ended and the U.S. Supreme Court ratified both "separate but equal" *and* lynching, six members of the Virginia KKK gunned him down. His sons subsequently killed the Klansmen in a series of shootouts – it was the only justice available – and the family moved north.

But that was then. I was growing up in the 20th Century. There had been no justice for

Emmett Till – his mother couldn't do anything except invite the world to judge the horror. Could there be justice for me?

I searched his face and asked: "If they did that to me, Daddy, would you do that to them?"

"Yes," he said, simply.

And that was enough for a black kid growing up in Harlem a year after the U.S. Supreme Court banned the practice of separate but unequal. It was enough to know there would be punishment – one way or another – either through Daddy and the law, or Daddy and the gun. It was enough to know that American society was improving – though slowly and begrudgingly. And there was justice to be had.

In 1966 the student chapter of the KKK tried to kill me for the effrontery of enrolling in the U. of Michigan's engineering school. Their first attempt left me crippled, and they called the dorm room at 15-minute intervals, round the clock, explaining the creative ways they intended to kill me if I didn't leave. I asked the Ann Arbor police for help. That was a mistake.

"You want to be safe, nigger?" asked the desk sergeant. "Then go back where you came from. Your kind doesn't belong here."

Daddy was right. The police were on the side of the KKK, whose members openly followed me everywhere. I couldn't go to the rest room unless one of two Jewish students stood watch: my roommate, Tom Lowe, now a California psychiatrist; or Paul Share, now a New York City lawyer.

White boys growing up are taught that the police are on their side. And that's invariably true. But black boys have to assume the reverse. It is ironic that the same week America watched George Zimmerman get away with killing 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, American theaters are showing Fruitvale Station, the story of Oscar Grant, who died in 2009. Grant was pulled off a San Francisco train because of an altercation with another passenger, and ordered to lie face down on the platform. He complied, and an officer casually walked over, pulled his gun, and shot Grant in the back, killing him. Grant had had The Talk. It just didn't help him. The officer, who said he meant to Taser Grant but pulled the wrong weapon on the unarmed, unthreatening, prone man, received a two year sentence in county jail for homicide since the judge felt that it was just an honest mistake.

In the wake of the exoneration of Zimmerman by an all-white, Florida jury, the airwaves have been replete with comments about "The Talk," and how young black boys have to learn how to act around white adults in general and white cops in particular so they do not appear

so threatening. It was stunning to hear the nation's first black Attorney General, Eric Holder, state that the verdict made him choose to have The Talk with his 15-year-old son.

Really, General? Now? What the hell took you so long? Did you think your prestige made your son immune from the reality of racism in America? Did you think he would be perceived any less threatening if he wore a tuxedo rather than a hoodie? Yes, American society is a lot more egalitarian than it was a half century ago. But racism has not departed and hate groups openly abound throughout the land.

The Talk isn't about teaching black boys how to act or, more precisely, how to grovel before whites with guns. Groveling, smiling, shuffling or praying has no effect on police attitudes in New York City, where Police Commissioner Ray Kelly has a policy that virtually every black boy and man in predominantly black areas should be regularly stopped and frisked.

The very thought that The Talk is about how black boys act is repugnant, since it implies that all black young men have a shared genetic character flaw and need to be told over and over how to behave. It's not black kids or black men with the attitude problem: it's racist white men who are threatening, particularly when they have guns.

The purpose of The Talk is to lift a veil of innocence from the eyes of black boys so they can recognize a danger when it appears. Sometimes, that danger comes from a white man with a gun. And sometimes, it comes from white women who assume that any white man with a gun is their protector, and any black male –even a kid armed only with a pack of Skittles – is a threat to be removed.