

# In White America

## A Salute to Rufus King High School, Milwaukee

By Dan Holden

I had the privilege of witnessing an extraordinary event recently. I went to a performance of *In White America*, by a diverse group of high school students with an apparent hunger to know more of the history of the nation through the lens of black people who have lived here over the past 500 years. I came away both emotionally disturbed but inspired by the bravery, compassion and resolute insistence of these young people to know and speak their truth when it is not easy to do so.

Martin Duberman's play, *In White America*, won the Vernon Rice/Drama Desk Award for Best Off-Broadway Production in 1963. Fifty years ago, in 1966 Milwaukee, Joanne Williams was a student at Rufus King and participated in an experiment involving this play. A sampling of students from urban, predominantly Black Rufus King High School exchanged places with a group of rural, predominantly White students from Kaukauna, Wisconsin. Students lived with their exchange families and attended their school for one month. For those of you alive then, you know how radical a move this must have been. They then shared their experiences with one another before putting on the play together. Media at the time largely ignored the event.

Fifty years later, 2016 in Milwaukee, Williams (now a retired television news woman) called together those original students and had them meet one another and also introduced them

to a new generation of students who re-enacted their play. It was a powerful and beautiful performance.

Like most white people, I knew the nation's history but pretended I did not. There is one easy litmus test for a diagnosis of 'pretending'. If you are a White person and think the past is in the past and should be left there, here's the test: *If Black and White races are equal and receive equal treatment in America, would you elect to have the daily experiences Black people have?* Few White people who are honest with themselves would answer, "Yes" to this question. We do know.

When I see, hear and feel our nation's 500-year history broken down and delivered in a two-hour performance, three things became starkly and undeniably clear to me.

First, the subjugation and dehumanization of black people has, from the beginning, been a conscious strategy of our mostly white government. This process was designed to impact every aspect of (a black person's) life and survival: family life, religion, spirituality, civic life, employment, finances, education, access to health services, voting rights and justice. We know this through narrative transcripts from the legislative halls in Washington, through journal entries of normal Americans, and through trained observations of journalists, ministers and educators over the past five centuries.

Second, the collective suppression of black people in America took place *while, simultaneously, the nation was being built upon core national values of freedom, liberty and justice for all!* How is this mind-bending dynamic even possible? It is not collective amnesia; we have not forgotten anything. Schizophrenia is closer to the truth. When I returned home from the performance I looked up 'schizophrenia'. Here's what I discovered: Schizophrenia means...'*characterized by the coexistence of disparate or antagonistic elements, delusions and a gradual*

*withdrawal from reality.'* It seems to me that we can make the observation that the collective group of my fellow white Americans suffer from a form of *Racial Schizophrenia*.

We experience ourselves as normal and healthy people living normal and healthy lives. We go to school, work, and earn a living; we raise families and strive to do what's right. We want to get ahead and believe our best shot is through individual industriousness, hard work and motivation. At the same time, however, we hold a view of black people as "less than" us in all ways and undeserving of what we have had to work hard to achieve. In fact, we view any attempt of black people to demand equal treatment (in housing, employment, education, justice, for example) as unfair to us. We feel anger and outrage at the persistence of black people today who demand fair treatment, thinking, as we do, that they already have it and have had it for a long time. Even the nicest and warmest among us have this latent anger, fear and outrage in us...and deny it's so. Although it is based on stereotypes, we don't hold these beliefs about Black people as stereotypes. It's worse: we think we're just dealing with reality. This is what delusions are: untruths appearing as reality.

*Racial schizophrenia: the disparate and antagonistic elements we deny eventually control us.* Haven't you wondered about all the exaggerated fuss over immigration focused primarily on our southern border? Or why an entire segment of our nation's population has to remind the rest of us that Black Lives Matter? *Racial Schizophrenia*. No guilt or shame is required, no judging right or wrong is needed either. The discipline is simply to look honestly at current reality. Like the young people did at Rufus King.

This final observation from last night's performance is perhaps the most sobering: from the beginning of our nation, those who argued for the dehumanization of black people (and later, all dark skinned people) *were convinced this was the way to build a great nation*. From Thomas Jefferson all the way up to the present day. Exclusion was the way to build a great

government, great universities, great armies and industries, great healthcare and quality of life. Few of us get up in the morning eagerly looking forward to doing what's wrong or hurtful. We are not bad people! Excluding Black people was seen as the way to do great things. The NBA, MLB or NCAA functioned like this for many years until they learned that by including all athletes, their product and revenue were enhanced. Yet, in many of other areas, our nation struggles to learn the same lessons.

We are no longer a Top 10 performer. In some, education, healthcare, quality of life and industrial productivity, we are not even in the Top 25. The trend is not moving in our favor. I know. I've worked in American business for 30 years. I am a former Teacher of the Year at the University of Notre Dame. I know and I'm worried.

I am a 67 year old white man. I served overseas in the US Army from 1968-1970. I served while American Admiral James Stockdale was tortured and did solitary confinement in the Hanoi Hilton, the notorious prison camp in what was then North Vietnam. Admiral Stockdale was the highest-ranking prisoner of war during the Vietnam conflict. He was also singlehandedly responsible for saving the lives of countless other prisoners while he himself was in solitary confinement. He developed what came to be called The Stockdale Paradox, a disciplined way of moving through brutal conditions.

Stockdale discovered there were three types of prisoners confined with him; only one type was likely to survive. The first to die were the overly optimistic, the positive thinkers. They were convinced they'd be released by Christmas...or by Easter...or by summer, surely. They died or killed themselves out of a broken heart. The second type were those who were overcome by the brutality and injustice of their circumstances; they died of despair, a broken spirit. The third type was the most likely to survive. These prisoners were characterized by two distinct traits: an unwavering commitment to their cause or mission

and, paradoxically, a relentless, all-in commitment to reporting the truth of their catastrophic, life-draining circumstances.

Stockdale knew that by reporting the full truth of their experiences (including their own confessions while being tortured) the soul and psyche of prisoners could be saved. Guilt or shame would not take hold of the heart and mind. The mission of returning home alive could and did advance, even in the middle of a prisoner of war camp.

I thought about Stockdale last night and woke up this morning thinking that the Stockdale Paradox could be the powerful antidote for those of us who suffer from *Racial Schizophrenia*. Radical truth telling in support of a great mission. The mission of the young people I met last night is equally heroic: *freedom, liberty and justice for all*. The conditions: extremely challenging today and even more so historically. Admiral Stockdale would have wept with pride had he heard the truth telling at Rufus King. And their relentless quest for their mission. I would have gladly given him a Kleenex, the least I could do.

William Stafford, a former U.S. Poet Laureate once wrote, in *A Ritual to Read to Each other*:

*If you don't know the kind of person I am  
and I don't know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
and following the wrong god home we may miss  
our star.*

*For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,  
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break  
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood*

*storming out to play through the broken dike.*

Racial schizophrenia is a horrible error of childhood. We pick it up from TV, movies, from teachers, parents and others who love us. It is truly...*a pattern others made*. I don't want to live out a life by a pattern anyone other than me has made. Yet I have. When we turn away into our comfortable life and ignore the present day experience of our Black American citizens, *we let the fragile sequence break... sending the horrible errors of childhood storming out to play*. The only remedy is to know ourselves and to allow ourselves to be known by others. If you think you've got this down you're surely suffering from Racial Schizophrenia and simply don't know it. The great poet goes on to say:

*It's important for awake people to be awake*

*Or a diminishing line will lull us back to sleep...*

*Let your Yes, No and Maybe be clear--*

*The darkness around us is deep.*

I thank the performers at Rufus King for ruining my night. I haven't felt this inspired in a long time! Thank you for helping me to wake up. I'd like to make the way easier for you instead of being another impediment.

Joanne Williams, I don't know you but I want you to know how deeply and profoundly moved I am by your presence and with the courage and hope you embody. To hold this particular vision for 50 years takes my breath away. Even though you are retired it is obvious you are not done yet! Neither am I. I am indebted to you.

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