

Excerpts from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

It went on that way, as I became increasingly restless and disturbed through the first semester. And then one day, just about when those of us who had passed were about to move up to 8-A, from which we would enter high school the next year, something happened which was to become the first major turning point of my life.

Somehow, I happened to be alone in the classroom with Mr. Ostrowski, my English teacher. He was a tall, rather reddish white man and he had a thick mustache. I had gotten some of my best marks under him, and he had always made me feel that he liked me. He was, as I have mentioned, a natural-born “advisor,” about what you ought to read, to do, or think—about any and everything. We used to make unkind jokes about him: why was he teaching in Mason instead of somewhere else, getting for himself some of the “success in life” that he kept telling us how to get?

I know that he probably meant well in what he happened to advise me that day. I doubt that he meant any harm. It was just in his nature as an American white man. I was one of his top students, one of the school’s top student—but all he could see for me was the kind of future “in your place” that almost all white people see for black people.

He told me, “Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you been giving it thought?”

The truth is, I hadn’t. I never have figured out why I told him, “Well, yes, sir, I’ve been thinking I’d like to be a lawyer.” Lansing certainly had no Negro lawyers—or doctors either—in those days, to hold up an image I might have aspired to. All I really knew for certain was that a lawyer didn’t wash dishes, as I was doing.

Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised, I remember, and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He kind of half-smiled and said, “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about thing you *can* be. You’re good with your hands—making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person—you’d get all kinds of work.”

The more I thought afterwards about what he had said, the more uneasy it made me. It just kept treading around in my mind.

What made it really begin to disturb me was Mr. Ostrowski’s advice to others in my class—all of them white. Most of them had told him they were planning to become farmers. But those who wanted to strike out on their own, to try something new, he had encouraged. Some, mostly girls, wanted to be teachers. A few wanted other professions, such as one boy who wanted to become a county agent; another, a veterinarian; and one girl wanted to be a nurse. They all reported that Mr. Ostrowski had encouraged what they had wanted. Yet nearly none of them had earned marks equal to mine.

It was a surprising thing that I had never thought of it that way before, but I realized that whatever I wasn’t, I *was* smarter than nearly all of those white kids. But apparently I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever I wanted to be.

It was then that I began to change—inside.

I drew away from white people. I came to class, and I answered when called upon. It became a physical strain simply to sit in Mr. Ostrowski’s class.

Where “nigger” had slipped off my back before, wherever I heard it now, I stopped and looked at whoever said it. And they looked surprised that I did.

I quit hearing so much “nigger” and “What’s wrong?”—which was the way I wanted it. Nobody, including the teachers, could decide what had come over me. I knew I was being discussed.

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The teachings of Mr. Muhammad stressed how history had been “whitened”—when white men had written history books, the black man simply had been left out. Mr. Muhammad couldn’t have said anything that would have struck me much harder. I had never forgotten how when my class, me and all of those whites, had studied seventh-grade United States history back in Mason, the history of the Negro had been covered in one paragraph, and the teacher had gotten a big laugh with his joke, “Negroes’ feet are so big that when they walk, they leave a hole in the ground.”

This is one reason why Mr. Muhammad’s teachings spread so swiftly all over the United States, among all Negroes, whether or not they became followers of Mr. Muhammad. The teachings ring true—to every Negro. You can hardly show me a black adult in America—or a white one, for that matter—who knows from the history books anything like the truth about the black man’s role. In my own case, once I heard of the “glorious history of the black man,” I took special pains to hunt in the library for books that would inform me on details about black history.

I can remember very accurately the very first set of books that really impressed me. I have since bought that set of books and have it at my home for my children to read as they grow up. It's called *Wonders of the World*. It's full of pictures of archeological finds, statues that depict, usually, non-European people.

I found books like Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*. I read H.G. Wells' *Outline of History*, *Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois gave me a glimpse into the black people's history before they came to this country. Carter G. Woodson's *Negro History* opened my eyes about black empires before the black slave was brought to the United States, and the early Negro struggles for freedom.

...

Since slavery, the American white man has always kept some handpicked Negroes who fared much better than the black masses suffering and slaving out in the hot fields. The white man had these "house" and "yard" Negroes for his special servants. He threw them more crumbs from his rich table, he even let them eat in his kitchen. He knew that he could always count on them to keep "good massa" happy in his self image of being so "good" and "righteous." "Good massa" always heard just what he wanted to hear from these "house" and "yard" blacks. "You're such a good, *fine*, massa!" Or, "Oh, massa, those old black nigger fieldhands out there, they're happy just like they are; why, massa, they're not intelligent enough for you to try and do any better for them, massa—"

Well, slavery time's "house" and "yard" Negroes had become more sophisticated, that was all. When now the white man picked up his telephone and dialed his "house" and "yard" Negroes—why, he didn't even need to instruct the trained black puppets. They had seen the television program; had read the newspapers. They were already composing their lines. They knew what to do.

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Even so, my bitterness was less against the white press than it was against those Negro "leaders" who kept attacking us. Mr. Muhammad said he wanted us to try our best not to publicly counterattack the black "leaders" because one of the white man's tricks was keeping the black race divided and fighting against each other. Mr. Muhammad said that this had traditionally kept the black people from achieving the unity which was the worst need of the black race in America.

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The Pan American jet which took me home—it was flight 115—landed at New York's Kennedy Air Terminal on May 21, at 4:25 in the afternoon. We passengers filed off the plane and toward Customs. When I saw the crowd of fifty or sixty reporters and photographers, I honestly wondered what celebrity I had been on the plane with.

But I was the "villain" they had come to meet.

In Harlem especially, and also in some other U.S. cities, the 1964 long, hot summer's predicted explosions had begun. Article after article in the white man's press had cast me as a symbol—if not a causative agent—of the "revolt" and of the "violence" of the American black man, wherever it had sprung up.

In our biggest press conference that I had ever experienced anywhere, the camera bulbs flashed, and the reporters fired questions.

"Mr. Malcolm X, what about those "Blood Brothers," reportedly affiliated with your organization, reportedly trained for violence, who have killed innocent white people?"... "Mr. Malcolm X, what about your comment that Negroes should form rifle clubs?..."

I answered the question. I knew I was back in America again, hearing the subjective, scapegoat-seeking questions of the white man. New York white youth were killing victims; that was a "sociological" problem. But when black youth killed somebody, the power structure was looking to hang somebody. When black men had been lynched or otherwise murdered in cold blood, it was always said, "Things will get better." When whites had rifles in their homes, the Constitution gave them the right to protect their home and themselves. But when black people even spoke of having rifles in their homes, that was "ominous."

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Largely, the American white man's press refused to convey that I was now attempting to teach Negroes a new direction. With the 1964 "long, hot summer" steadily producing new incidents, I was constantly accused of "stirring

up Negroes.” Every time I had another radio or television microphone at my mouth, when I was asked about “stirring up Negroes” or “inciting violence,” I’d get hot.

“It takes no one to stir up the sociological dynamite that stems from the unemployment, bad housing, and inferior education already in the ghettos. This explosively criminal condition has existed for so long, it needs no fuse; it fuses itself; it spontaneously combusts from within itself...”

They called me “the angriest Negro in America.” I wouldn’t deny that charge. I spoke exactly as I felt. “I *believe* in anger. The Bible says there is a *time* for anger.” They called me “a teacher, a fomenter of violence.” I would say point blank, “That is a lie. I’m not for wanton violence, I’m for justice. I feel that if white people were attacked by Negroes—if the forces of law prove unable, or inadequate, or reluctant to protect those whites from those Negroes—then those white people should protect and defend themselves from those Negroes, using arms if necessary. And I feel that when the law fails to protect Negroes from whites’ attack, then those Negroes should use arms, if necessary, to defend themselves.”

“Malcolm X Advocates Armed Negroes!”

What was wrong with that? I’ll tell you what was wrong. I was a black man talking about physical defense against the white man. The white man can lynch and burn and bomb and beat Negroes—that’s all right: “Have patience” ... “The customs are entrenched” ... “Things are getting better.”

Well, I believe it’s a crime for anyone who is being brutalized to continue to accept that brutality without doing something to defend himself. If that’s how “Christian” philosophy is interpreted, if that what Gandhian philosophy teaches, well, then, I will call them criminal philosophies.

I tried in every speech I made to clarify my new position regarding white people—“I don’t speak against the sincere, well-meaning, good white people. I have learned that there *are* some. I have learned that not all white people are racists. I am speaking against and my fight is against the white *racists*. I firmly believe that Negroes have the right to fight against these racists, by any means that are necessary.”

But the white reporters kept wanting me linked with that word “violence.” I doubt if I had one interview without having to deal with that accusation.

“I *am* for violence if non-violence means we continue postponing a solution to the American black man’s problem—just to *avoid* violence. I don’t go for non-violence if it also means a delayed solution. To me a delayed solution is a non-solution. Or I’ll say it another way. If it must take violence to get the black man his human rights in this country, I’m *for* violence exactly as you know the Irish, the Poles, or Jews would be if they were flagrantly discriminated against. I am just as they would be in that case, and they would be for violence—no matter what the consequences, no matter who was hurt by the violence.”