

Deer Segregation

On October 26, 1967, six months before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to a group of students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia.

“I want to ask you a question, and that is: What is your life's blueprint?”

June 15, 1967

Dear Diary,

Tomorrow is the last day of school! Mrs. O says we are now 3rd graders.

I will wear my bright orange shorts and bring back all my books.

We had an assembly about the blacks coming in September and Principal G made us promise stuff. Like being nice to them.

(spelling corrected for publication)

My diary with the pink cover and princess lock was my first one, and the last one to have such short entries for each day! As if my exploding emotions could fit on those four gold lines. The diary started as something my mom wrote in with me, for a year. She wrote while I talked. Then I said it was my turn, and I never let her see another entry. It was where I wrote down my fears on summer nights about the black kids coming to our school. But during the day I acted like I was excited. I was. I was scared. And excited.

“Whenever a building is constructed, you usually have an architect who draws a blueprint, and that blueprint serves as the pattern, as the guide, and a building is not well erected without a good, solid blueprint.”

Every morning, after oatmeal, or in the middle of it, with too little or too much milk, I heard the bell across the street rallying kids from the playground to the line-ups for school to begin. Breakfast stopped, and I started. Two minutes at a quick pace got me to the lines. In the snowstorms we could come in the building early, but only 5 minutes, so most of the time we had to sit under the school eaves, shivering. I needed mittens and even then I needed to put my mittens under my armpits. The Windy City means the cold air races through your eardrums and fingernails. Some kids sat with impatient parents in cars with the engine running. But most of us walked. No one came by bus.

“Now each of you is in the process of building the structure of your lives, and the question is whether you have a proper, a solid and a sound blueprint.”

A two-story, block of rectangle cream-colored building, with hard floors tile floors and only two rugs in the whole place – the library and the kindergarten classroom. The librarian read from books with children that looked like us. White and small and troubled only by friendships or freckles. There was black skin only in the Encyclopedia pictures about Africa. And all the college brochures at my house had only white students in them. My 12-year-old brother was college-obsessed at a young age. He wanted to be smarter and older. Always. And he was. And he told me so all the time.

“I want to suggest some of the things that should begin your life's blueprint. Number one in your life's blueprint, should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your worth and your own *somebodiness*. Don't allow anybody to make you feel that you're nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth, and always feel that your life has ultimate significance.”

April 26, 1967

Dear Diary,

Mom made me go with her to the poor part of town to see a light black poem-ess. And there were dogs without leashes and kids flying on bikes right in front of cars. It was scary. This is where the kids come from to our school. 6 ½ weeks til summer.

The summer before Third Grade I listened to my parents drone on about integration and desegregation and how my school was a part of an important experiment. Buses would be bringing black students to our school, from the neighborhood I had not been to but once. Near the Chicago border. My mom visited a very elderly famous poet friend, who spoke with a strong Spanish accent. I tried very hard to sit without wiggling in an overly squishy chair, but eventually I whispered to mom, "Can I go out into the front yard?" but she and the poet admonished me not to.

"Secondly, in your life's blueprint you must have as the basic principle the determination to achieve excellence in your various fields of endeavor. You're going to be deciding as the days, as the years unfold what you will do in life — what your life's work will be. Set out to do it well."

Mom said the famous poet wrote about the ghettos in Chicago and she patiently explained what ghettos were, and how I was born in one, and I figured out later that we moved to the progressive but safe not quite suburbia Evanston so they could steep in the academic tea of Northwestern University. I had no idea what the Civil Rights movement was, or civil unrest, or even the Civil War, but I heard my parent's professor progressives discussing these late at night with vodka ice-cubed drinks clinking. Columnists from the newspaper came over and raised their voices in debate and quoted other journalists about Martin Luther King. I imagined him as a King – a kind one with robes - whenever they said his name. I finally saw him on TV and figured out he was a black minister with strong opinions. In my house he was famous. But no one at school ever mentioned him.

"And I say to you, my young friends, doors are opening to you--doors of opportunities that were not open to your mothers and your fathers — and the great challenge facing you is to be ready to face these doors as they open."

August 17, 1967

Dear Diary,

Mom says I will make new friends but I can't invite them over because they have to take the bus home after school. That is not a friend. Like Jill. Today Jill's mom on the phone said there were going to be niggers in our school and that teachers will have to slow down the whole class to teach them. And that their names will be hard to pronounce.

Labor Day weekend we had a beach picnic with my girlfriends and I noticed they were...white. I never noticed before. I overheard one mom kept talking about how she was ready to remove her daughter if she wasn't challenged academically. She was on a wait list at a Catholic School, even though she wasn't religious. I asked my mom later why the Catholics weren't doing busing like we were. I didn't understand her answer.

"Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great essayist, said in a lecture in 1871, 'If a man can write a better book or preach a better sermon or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door.'"

September 5, 1967

Dear Diary,

I did not wait for the bell today. I got there early, to watch the buses pull up. The principal made us stand far back on the grass. I wanted to run up to the bus doors and yell, "It's okay! You are welcome here! We want to be your friends!" But I stood there. Scared for them. I would never want to be them.

I stood and dug my canvas slip-on shoe into the grass and pulled at my hair curls and watched, with so many other students. Desperately wanting to make the busloads of kids comfortable here. Two buses. I started counting the black bodies and got to 17, but their hair pulled me in, and my fascination with the braids lost my counting. The principal was there in his suit, motioning to enter the building. They were going to find their classrooms before the bell. I guessed there were over 50 kids.

In the classroom the black kids sat in scattered seats, and we found our nametags and stared at the cardboard names on the desks instead of the black kids. I snuck a peak at the nametag next to me, which was Velma. This was a relief. I could pronounce that name – I had done it all my life. It was my sister's. She had legs that made her knees brush the bottom of the desk. At recess line-up I stood near her to get brave enough ask if she wanted to play Simon Says. She shrugged. That meant she didn't know how to play, or to leave her alone, or that she would play if I taught her the rules? I told her about my sister's name, and how certain kids cheated in Simon Says, and I heard my mom's voice in my head, "Don't talk anyone's ear off!" Velma knew a little bit of all of the games, and quickly learned the tricks of Red Rover, 4-Square, Wall Ball, and Pop-Up in a few days. Her legs were always dressed in tights with a dress, and were always fast when games involved running. She was like a gazelle.

"This hasn't always been true — but it will become increasingly true, and so I would urge you to study hard, to burn the midnight oil; I would say to you, don't drop out of school. I understand all the sociological reasons, but I urge you that in spite of your economic plight, in spite of the situation that you're forced to live in — stay in school."

September 18, 1967

Dear Diary,

Velma sits with her bus friends at lunch. But we are library helper buddies now!! If we finish our daily math early, and do all our homework that week, and have good behavior cards on the board, we get to go to the library and SORT and SHELVE. 10:40 until LUNCH! Almost an hour, Velma said. She said the library was so huge.

I asked if she had been to the one in downtown Chicago and she said "No." I tried to explain, but failed. Questions like these made her get really quiet, so I would tap my temples and tell my brain to stop asking those. Like if she had a bicycle. Or where she went for summer vacation. What camp she went to, or dance classes she took. What stuffed animal was her favorite. Or what swimming pool she took lessons at. But Girl Scouts! I didn't mention it, but she did. She wondered about the brown and green uniforms that girls wore on certain days. Brownies were until 4th grade. But it was all the same to me. Meetings. Crafts. Litter Pick-Up. Jump-Rope Contests. I liked doing things I thought I couldn't do at first. Like Chinese Jump Rope. And horseshoes. And the high-dive. I wanted her to join so badly, but mom said none of the bus kids could do any after-school dates. I was going to fix that.

“And when you discover what you will be in your life, set out to do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it. don't just set out to do a good job. Set out to do such a good job that the living, the dead or the unborn couldn't do it any better.”

October 2, 1967

Dear Diary,

We had Brownies with the black girls today. Velma, Ninia, Teagan, Chaybra. They had their normal clothes but it was ok. Mrs. M. is raising money to buy them uniforms. We made suet bird feeders to bring to different old folks homes. It was sticky and fun. Velma came over afterwards. She walks faster because of her deer legs. Dad drove her home when he got back from the college.

Velma met Velma, my sister in junior high. They talked about the Cubs. I gave a tour. Her eyes locked on every little thing in the house, like she had never been in a house with antiques. I showed her my closet that was big enough to play stuffed animals in the back, with the slanting ceiling. She was happiest on the tire swing outside. I all the time wanted to ask if it was uncomfortable to be around all whites. But I never did. But she was a mean jump-roper, suet-maker, math story-problem solver, and book shelver. And we dared each other to be better than the other one, but in some things she was just that: better. Like I wasn't going to try to beat her in 4-Square. She didn't need dance classes. She danced in every physical endeavor.

“If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well. If you can't be a pine at the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley. Be be the best little shrub on the side of the hill.”

November 22, 1967

In Brownies today we had to make turkeys out of construction paper but they were ugly. So Velma and I made our own, from the start, without the strips the den moms wanted us to use. I said I had to go to the bathroom but I ran upstairs from the basement and snuck into the classroom to get markers from the teacher's desk. Tomorrow we drive the long boring drive to cousin Bonnies.

“Be a bush if you can't be a tree. If you can't be a highway, just be a trail. If you can't be a sun, be a star. For it isn't by size that you win or fail. Be the best of whatever you are.”

April 5, 1968

Velma was not at school today. We had an assembly about Martin Luther King. We watched pictures of him in protests and I wanted to walk all the way to Velma's and tell her I was sorry. Dad and mom talked on and on tonight about it.

When she came back, after Spring Break, she was quieter, and we weren't library buddies anymore, because she didn't do her daily math as fast, and Brownies was over for the year, and I was scared

she would never talk to me again. I couldn't call her over the break because she said she didn't have a phone. I think she really did, but her mom told her not to give it out to any white kids. At recess she still loped like a deer in Red Rover and even just tag. But she didn't glue herself to my side anymore. I was missing a little part of me for a long time. But when I went to dance class, I pictured her body leaping like a deer in mine.

Kendra
Wagner