



Fire in the Heart

**HOW WHITE ACTIVISTS
EMBRACE RACIAL JUSTICE**

Mark R. Warren



CHAPTER TWO

Starting Down the Road

Seminal Experiences and the Moral Impulse to Act

JIM CAPRARO GREW up in Marquette Park, Chicago, in the fifties and early sixties, a child of Italian Catholic immigrants. His neighbors, like his parents, were white working-class ethnics who had moved out of Chicago's inner city to this neighborhood of modest homes. Jim's family and the nuns and teachers at his Catholic high school taught him that the future was bright, that America was the land of opportunity, "the greatest country in the world." After all, Americans had recently elected their first Catholic president, and folks in Marquette Park could aspire to moving even further up and out to the Shangri-la of Chicago's more affluent suburbs. When Jim was sixteen, however, he experienced an incident that would profoundly alter his sense of the world. It was the summer of 1966, and Jim's parents had just given him permission to use the family car for the first time on a date. This was going to be a big day for Jim, but not for the reason he had in mind:

"This evening was going to be the biggest time in my life, you know, my first date with a girl in a car. It was a Chevy Bel Air, a '63 Chevy Bel Air. I was primping all day, just getting prepared for this date, and just way too full of nervous energy. I went out in the afternoon to take the car and get it gassed up or something, because I got to prepare, right?"

As I went out, a very strange sequence of experiences happened. First thing was, I couldn't take the car and gas it up because there were school buses double-parked on my block, blocking all the cars in. Nobody's going anywhere. Although they looked like school buses, they were powder blue. I'd never seen that before. Then all of a sudden, policemen start piling off the school bus next door. They're right in front of me, forming up, military-like, shoulder to shoulder with batons in their hands. They had blue helmets on. I had never seen police riot gear before. That's what they had, riot helmets. They all started to double-time, quick-march south in this long formation. It looked like thousands. I don't know, maybe it was a few hundred. But it just was—wow! Something's going on. I wonder what.

I saw a huge crowd of white people, four or five deep, on the sidewalk going out into the street. There were policemen with batons holding them off away from the street. And I think it was the owners—somebody—were passing out beer bottles. It wasn't cans in those days. It was bottles. People were throwing the beer bottles, just hurling them, at something. Across the street there's some big hubbub, and I could see black people. I could also see clergy who were not black. They all had signs, and the signs said things like End Slums, Open Housing. It was a demonstration. And it was going past the Marquette Park monument. ... People are jeering and yelling, "N-ggers go home," and it's terrible. It's ugly. And it was so strange because, literally twenty minutes before, I'm thinking, "Got to gas up the car. I'm going on a date!"

At the intersection, a black couple came up in a car. The police had kept the crowd pretty well off the street, but it was work for them, right? And a black couple just coming out on the street gets stopped at the stoplight. The crowd pushes past the police and surrounds this car. I remember this so vividly—it's a Corvair, which was a small car then, Chevy Corvair. Crowd totally surrounds the car. The people inside the car are really afraid. I mean, they're just terrified. People start rocking this car back and forth. The people inside are literally huddled. The light is red. They're stopped. There's a crowd all around them. The police are trying to peel the crowd away from the outside. A girl about my age jumps up on the hood, screaming and yelling and swearing at the people inside and kicking at the windshield in front of the driver. I remember thinking she would have mangled their faces if there wasn't this windshield.

The crowd starts to go that way. I get about two blocks down, and I see people with brown shirts and swastikas and bullhorns, trying to take this mob and rally it together. At which point in time, I said, "I'm getting out of here."

I don't know that I was there more than a half an hour, maybe forty minutes, but it was the longest half hour in my life. And it changed my life forever. Kind of an epiphany, I guess. When I went home, that night I couldn't sleep. I had this never-ending stream of thoughts. Everything I thought I had learned or was led to believe, I thought was a lie. We're not the greatest country in the world. I was always taught that we were the greatest. Six years ago, John Kennedy was elected president. What happened? How could we be the greatest country in the world? How the hell could that be? What just happened two blocks from my house? This

can't be the best neighborhood. Look at what people do! Look at how they were behaving. How could that be? Anybody could grow up to be president—I believed this, right? Well, I didn't think the people who were marching in the park that day had any shot at ever being president.

I got pissed. Mad, I mean. How dare these people do this stuff? This is a democracy. People have a right to say things and march and think of themselves as being equal with everybody else and in fact be equal to everybody else."

Jim returned to Brother Rice High School that fall and began questioning many things he was taught. He grew his hair long and spoke out against the Vietnam War. After high school, he worked in the same Motorola plant as his parents while attending college at night, eventually becoming quite a student activist and an antiwar activist. He worked with black student activists and felt "It was all part of the same big thing. It was all part of the world that should be created." One day, he heard Black Power advocate Stokely Carmichael tell white activists that if they were serious about fighting racism, they should go home and make a difference in their own white communities. And that's exactly what Jim decided to do.

In the meantime, the Klan and the Nazi Party had moved into Marquette Park to organize white residents against racial integration. Black protesters countered with their own marches, and Marquette Park "became the racial battleground of America," according to Jim. He first took a job for the Southwest Community Congress to work against block busting and redlining, practices designed to keep blacks out of the neighborhood. He then helped build what became the Greater Southwest Development Corporation, which follows a twin strategy: to promote business and economic development to stabilize the neighborhood while working to stop discriminatory and predatory lending practices that prevent integration.

Jim's decision to return to his neighborhood was not an easy one, and it marked a significant change in his thinking. His initial reaction to Carmichael was "Shit, I can't go home because home is bad. It's wrong." However, the more he thought about Carmichael's challenge, the more he felt responsible for changing his community:

"Newsweek reporters in the eighties would come here and say, "Well, how could you work there? It's racist." And I'd say, "Well, that's why we work here." When I began to describe it, I said, think about it like Vietnam and the United States' battle against communism. We became the racial

battleground, just like Vietnam was the political and ideological battleground.”

In fact, coming home for Jim also meant reconnecting with the core values of his family and faith. In order to do this kind of work, Jim says this:

“You got to think for yourself. You got to ask, what makes sense to me? What’s my logic about this stuff? And once you go there, you’re not very far from, “What do I really believe? What’s at the center of my values?” Even though my parents were afraid, they had very good values. And I had really good values, I think, because of them”

In Jim’s eyes, the problem was not his neighbors’ values; rather, the problem was the contradiction between those professed values and his community’s practice in regard to racism:

“I was motivated by both the Catholic faith and my parents. In retrospect it was the true essence of Christian values that I was trying to follow. I’ll never forget in fifth grade Sister Robert Marie teaching in religion class about Jesus and the law of love. That really stayed with me, that good Christian people are supposed to love people, and if you follow, Jesus you do that. Later, when I said, “It’s all a lie,” I think there was a schism in my brain. We’re supposed to be the greatest country in the world, but how could we be the greatest country in the world? To be great you’ve got to reconcile with God, and you can’t reconcile with God if it isn’t about love. So there’s a disconnect there. It wasn’t about the church. It was about secular society and its inability to abide by what the church had taught.”

For thirty-five years now, Jim has lived and worked in Marquette Park, advocating for stable integration and economic development in one of the country’s foremost symbols of Northern racism. In fact, Jim now bristles at people who stereotype Marquette Park. White flight has largely ended, and the neighborhood is quite diverse, although Jim finds it a struggle to attract new white residents. Moreover, as whites and blacks have met in neighborhood institutions, Jim sees them begin to build relationships and thereby combat hatred and racial prejudice. In a way, Jim wants to re-create the community of his childhood but also ensure that it is open to and inclusive of all races. Growing up, his white neighbors feared the inner city to their backs and looked longingly toward the Shangri-la of the suburbs. Jim wants to create a multiracial Shangri-la right in Marquette Park.

Seminal Experiences and Anger at Injustice

I have told Jim's story at length because it powerfully captures themes I discovered in the interviews I conducted. Virtually all of the white activists I interviewed—forty-six out of fifty—could clearly recall at least one incident that dramatically altered their sense of race. I call these seminal experiences. Representing profound moral shocks, they are accompanied by powerful emotions, typically anger or outrage at injustice. These experiences make whites aware, for the first time, of the reality of racism. They lead to righteous anger for the very reason that racist practice violates the values of justice and equality with which these people had been brought up and in which they deeply believe.

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