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RACE

HOW BLACKS &
WHITES THINK
& FEEL ABOUT
THE AMERICAN
OBSESSION

Studs Terkel



The Park

JIM CAPRARO

It is an easy, sunny autumn afternoon, 1990. He is driving me along the streets of Marquette Park, Chicago.

The name immediately calls forth a troubled memory of this neighborhood hood on the city's Southwest Side, 1966. It was here that Martin King, while leading a march, suffered what he described as his most traumatic experience; never had he encountered so much hate, not even in the South. He had been struck by several hurled rocks. Cars were turned and burned.

Jim is the executive director of the Greater Southwest Development Corporation, a not-for-profit neighborhood group. "We set out to revitalize this area."

"I lived here all my life and married a girl who grew up in the neighborhood. I live three blocks away from my wife's parents and seven blocks from mine. I have two kids. My son is a sophomore at St. Rita's a high school I attended. When he was in sixth grade, he was in the same room my wife had been in."

THE PARK

In 1966, this was pretty much an all-white neighborhood. There were some Hispanics, not many. No blacks. It was more fear than hate. They thought that if black people moved in, stores would be abandoned, factories close down. Because of race. There was something about blackness. They feared the neighborhood would deteriorate.

(Throughout our ride-around, he is continuously pointing things out.)

Sears we're in front of is very profitable. When I started working here in 1976, it was surrounded by vacant, burned-out buildings. It was just a desolate, threatening area. You should have seen the charred bricks and rubble, the boarded-up buildings. People were afraid to walk here. It didn't make any difference what color you were, you were just fearful of being here.

We set out to put together an economic-development program. Our feeling was if people could do normal things together, like shop in a grocery store-See those two women walking into Sears?

(A young white woman with a child in her arms is accompanied by an older woman, probably the grandmother. Immediately behind them is a young black couple. They enter the store together. The avenue is busy. People of all colors are strolling, window-shopping.)

See that church in the background? I went to grade school behind that church. St. Rita. We're building a senior-citizen apartment complex right next to it. On the waiting list, we have black people, whites, and Hispanics.

There's Marquette Video, right across from the church. It was a real estate office. I was sixteen, stood across the street, and I watched Martin Luther King and a number of other people picket this office, surrounded by jeering crowds.

We still have a problem we're working on. This is a burned-out building that was an insurance fire.

(We're passing the park.)

If this were summertime, you would see loads of children in the play lot: black, white, Spanish kids playing together. See those three girls? Walking out of Maria High School, run by the Sisters of St. Catherine. One's white, the other two black and Hispanic. 1966? Oh, God! Never in a million years.

I was sixteen, when Martin Luther King marched. through the park. That corner we just passed, I grew up on that block. One day I walked out of my house. I had just gotten my driver's license and was really excited. Dad said I could borrow the Chevy and I had a date. I was flying high. There's the house! I couldn't pull the Chevy away from the curb because, in front of my house, bumper to bumper, up my whole block and the three blocks around, there were buses. They were the size of the yellow school buses. But these were blue. I didn't know what was going on until I watched all those police officers get off in riot gear. It was the first time I had ever seen the riot helmets that became famous during the Democratic Convention in '68. They were forming up on my block in little platoons and double-timing down to Marquette Park.

My world changed that day. All of a sudden things I didn't understand happened. I grew up believing that this was part of America, with equal opportunity for all. That's what the Adrian Dominican nuns taught me at St. Rita, what my parents taught me. Here I was watching police going down to protect people who were trying to exercise free speech. I went down to the park to see what was going on. This was troubling, unsettling, and confusing.

I watched a car with two black people, who were unfortunate to be stopped by a red light. They were surrounded by a crowd of angry people. I watched a teen-age girl, who under other circumstances I might have thought was pretty, a girl I'd have liked to ask out on a date. I watched her jump on the hood of the car and start to kick at the windshield, yelling and screaming. Her face was twisted in rage and fury. I watched as cars burned and other things were set on fire. I remember the helicopters overhead. I had never seen them before, close up. The people standing around screaming and yelling.

At that moment, I went through a transformation. I wasn't really aware of much. I had made it through geometry and was interested in girls and had learned how to make good grades on tests without doing homework, and I was learning I would never be the world's next best shortstop for the White Sox. It had been one of my aspirations, the new Louie Aparacio.

My friends felt the same way I did, troubled. But a lot of the kids I grew up with were out there throwing rocks and bottles. They acted as if the stereotype was true, as though it was programmed to happen. Like there was a sickness here. What the nuns taught us about Jesus and the law of love, I didn't see that day. It sounds corny, but in the 1950s, you believed in your heart of hearts all those phrases about America and opportunity.

All this happened in August. In September that year, there were announcements on the school p.a. that anyone who took part in the rock throwing would be immediately expelled. The violent reactions had somehow become part of their being.

How come you weren't one of the rock-throwers?

I don't know. I just knew it wasn't right. I didn't have a clue in those days what was the side of good, but I knew throwing rocks was the side of evil.

My mother and father were hardworking people with good values. They were always upset when I was a kid and people talked all the time about the Mafia and stereotyped all Italians. Al Capone and all that. I think about that today when people talk about the El Rukns or the drug-traders and stereotype all black people. I think they could relate to these things.

My maternal grandparents came from Italy, and as soon as they landed, my grandfather went to work in a large Italian printing shop. My mother and her two sisters and her brother all went to work. They pooled their resources and bought a two-flat right here. It was the ethnic American dream, to move up a little bit in the world.

I grew up living in the first floor of that two-flat. I was one of those Southwest Side Catholics who believed there were two kinds of people in the neighborhood, the Catholics and the Publics. There were eastern Europeans. Mostly Lithuanian. Some Polish. Irish and Italians, too. All lily, white.

It was in the fifties, when the economy was pumping. TV had just come into its own. I was one of the first TV children, I guess. There was something strange about that. We all grew up wanting to live like Donna Reed. We all wanted to be out in the suburbs someday. Later, we wanted to be like Dick Van Dyke. He had this nice, placid suburban setting with his beautiful wife, Mary Tyler Moore. They had one beautiful child, Robbie. And that's the way it was supposed to be: successful, affluent, upper-middle-class. The suburbs, that's where the good life was.

Although we had a great neighborhood in a lot of ways-pick-up baseball, Little Leagues, the YMCA swimming pool-we always expected that we wouldn't live here someday. We expected it to racially change and the neighborhood wouldn't be quite good anymore. That it would be a bad neighborhood. There was some sort of fixed time period when all of a sudden things would change and get bad. In their minds, it was linked to racial change.

There was fear. There were some who felt actual hate. But the majority, I think, simply felt fear that the cohesive neighborhoodness wouldn't be here any longer.

The Adrian Dominican Sisters instilled in us a number of values. I'll never forget fifth grade and a class on Jesus and what it meant to love your neighbor. It may sound silly, but it sticks with me to this day.

My mom and dad worked in a factory and they had a lot of black and Hispanic friends. They come to our house. It never dawned on me that they didn't really live in the neighborhood, that they had to come from somewhere else. We'd go on company picnics and I would play with their kids. It seemed quite natural, though in retrospect it was actually unnatural when you think of my neighborhood.

After the King march, the neighborhood went back to being what it was. Nothing changed immediately. In the interim, there had been other incidents. Marquette Park became the symbolic battleground in the war of the racists. It became to that war what Vietnam was to the fight against communism. It was the place where people of strange ideologies would come to do battle. The American Nazi Party, with twenty-four members, opened up an office, just down this street. It was stuff of high visibility.

Meanwhile, the people who lived in bungalows and two-flats continued to lead their routine lives. Working-class people. They were never rich people out here. They were the people who worked for rich people. They worked on the production line or on the shipping-receiving docks. With blacks and Hispanics.

When people talked about neighborhoods deteriorating, they attributed it to race. That was the first thing our group challenged. Deterioration is not due to race; it's due to economics. You don't have a bakery that stays in business if the people don't have enough money to buy jelly rolls. People looked at the old neighborhoods, where once there were bakeries, and they'd say, "See what happens when `they' come." So we put together an economic-development plan.

We started on this corner, the racial dividing line. There were no stores here, because the whites didn't come here and neither did the blacks. You had vacancies, broken windows, and fires. We said there's enough of a market here, in this middle ground, if people could do routine things: going to the store together, standing at the butcher counter of the supermarket, stocking shelves, doing brake jobs in the Sears automotive section, going to McDonald's together. Living life as most people see it. Being normal. We chuckle around here, thinking about it. We got about \$45 million in investment along this main street. People drive down here now and they'll come in, sit down, and say, "This looks pretty normal."

In 1982, when the first black families moved in, we had some rocky times. Nothing happened with the very first black family. As more and more moved in, there were fire-bombings by young thugs. Through the diligence of community groups and church groups, those people were prosecuted and sent to prison. It's been a long time since something like that happened. Five years ago was the last incident.

We've been very active with banks and savings-and-loans to make sure the area is not redlined or disinvested. No more withdrawal of credit offerings in a neighborhood so it's hard to get a loan. Conventional mortgages as well as FHA are still available here.

We also act as a developer. The building we're sitting in right now, our group's headquarters, was our first project. When we took over, it was seventy-five percent vacant. One of our two tenants was a pornography shop. We rehabilitated the building and started to rent it out. Where the adult book store was is now a black-owned business. It was the first one at this intersection. Now we have Spanish-owned and Palestinian-owned firms here as well as black and white.

In '68, I was in Grant Park during the Democratic Convention. In college, I got involved in organizing the antiwar movement. That's when I realized I wanted to be a community organizer. These were the years in my life when I felt really alive. Things were changing and I was learning so fast, it was incredible.

I was in a church meeting a few months ago. Right here at St. Rita, a multiracial parish now. A little old white lady spoke: "I've spent all my life being scared to death of what would happen when the coloreds moved in. Some of my neighbors moved out when the first black family moved in. My black neighbors are a lot better than a lot of my white neighbors ever were.

They care about their kids, they care about their property, and they care about me, as their neighbor." So you have this fear that comes from stereotyping and generalities. And you have the individual, personal experience.

I'll never forget the meeting at one of the church basements here. It was the first time we got together in a public setting to talk about race. This was taboo in Marquette Park. We had maybe a hundred and sixty people in the crowd. At the end of the meeting, a woman from St. Claire's parish got up and said, "I went and talked to my black neighbors as soon as they moved in. I found out their name was thus-and-such and that they had two children. It was the first black family on the block. One child was learning disabled and the other was an honor student. The kids are mischievous, just like anybody else's kids. They stopped being the blacks who moved in and started being Mr. and Mrs. Whatever-their-name-is." It's so crazy in that it's so simple.

Property is the big thing here because it's the only investment these people have. The fear goes beyond property. It's fear of speaking out. Unfortunately the word "gradualism" had had bad meanings in the past. But in the seventies, where you had sudden, immediate changes, things went downhill. It involved block-busting by real-estate guys. People were scared out.

I have a black brother-in-law. Who would have thought, in 1966, when I stepped out my door and saw all those police in riot gear, that twenty-four years later, I'd still be living in Marquette Park and have nephews of a mixed race whom I love very much. My brother-in-law, my sister-in-law, and their children sleep over on occasion, as people in families do. We have a happy life as an extended family. Would that sixteen-year-old kid, a Marquette Park regular, ever dream it would come to this?

I'm beginning to feel that the greatest changes come from people who may hold an extreme position to begin with. It may be the ultimate irony is what has happened here in Marquette Park. A change occurs in people when they feel a deep need. When the troubles are visible. It was easy to see here.

Where it's invisible is where the real trouble is. In the corporate board room, in the suburban setting, on the management level-, where pretense is everything. It's not as visible as people throwing rocks, but may be potentially more damaging because it has a nice face on it.

Working-class people know in their guts what our Judeo-Christian ethic tells us. It calls on us to try our damndest to work at it. If we fall short, that's okay, because we're trying.

Sometimes I get up in the morning and pinch myself. We've made it to this place. It isn't that the challenge isn't still with us. If I could call on a baseball analogy, it's believing you could make it to the pennant and wanting to stay alive in the struggle long enough to make it. I have to remind myself when we have a down day that we never expected to still be here to have this down day. That in itself is a victory.