

Diversity Matters

A Final Word



W. Anthony Jenkins

And what becomes of
the little boy who grew up
too fast for his high-water
pants, ill-fitting shirt
and holed-sole shoes?

He is not bitter
with the past, nor is he
angry with the present.

He is simply looking
for a chance for
a better tomorrow.

I penned the above poem when I was about 15 years old after spending the summer of 1967 as an A Better Chance (ABC) student at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts with 50 other so-called “talented, underprivileged” youngsters who hailed from diverse communities across America. Young people with similar backgrounds were being hosted at multiple colleges and universities under ABC’s program serving as a cultural and academic bridge to enrollment at participating private boarding schools throughout the nation. That bridge was a portal from my Detroit eastside neighborhood to the Shattuck School in Faribault, Minnesota. As told in past President’s Page columns, my experience at Shattuck was a prelude to adventures and experiences beyond imagination for a youngster who grew up in a family of modest means, education, and social networks—one that led to college and graduate studies at Ivy League schools, a post-college fellowship for independent study in Tanzania, and professional basketball tours in Europe and South America.

Respect for diversity and multiculturalism is one of the greatest lessons I have learned on my journey. For example, my stay in Barcelona as a professional athlete meant being in the public eye and all that came

with a privileged lifestyle, including countless invitations to dine in the homes of both the rich and famous and ordinary folks. Of course, more often than not I was among people who did not look like me. Nonetheless, my skin color mattered little, if at all, whether I was in Paris, Barcelona, Lisbon, or Zürich. By that stage in my life, I knew not to allow circumstances and other people to define me or my place in the world and not to assume that others would necessarily see my skin color as a badge of inferiority. My experience in Europe verified lessons learned while growing up in an ethnically and racially diverse community in 1950’s Detroit:

Growing Up

I remember growing up black,
playing together games
on hot summer nights
in asphalt-covered streets
with Mr. Softee ice cream dripping
everywhere,
and clandestinely plucking fruit from
the trees

of neighbors while hiding behind
bushes or in unlighted garage doorways,
and trying to sleep restfully
on multi-bodied rollaway beds.

I remember growing up black,
dodging blues and blows,
and learning, without being told,
that with all of life’s strains and tears,
and the need to be at my best,
my skin color would serve me well.

In Europe, my skin color was not a barrier to mainstream relationships or experiences, but my experience in Tanzania was far different. The trappings of celebrity were gone. I lived in a modest, two-bedroom apartment made of concrete on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam. I typically dined on home-cooked

meals and patronized neighborhood shops and restaurants (most of which were owned by persons of East Indian or Pakistani descent) without any special fanfare or attention. Sometimes, the entertainment highlight of the week was watching a movie at the U.S. Embassy; admission was free for U.S. citizens.

My “family” away from home was an extended family of African-American men who migrated to Dar es Salaam more than a decade before I arrived and with their Nigerian and South African wives were raising their multicultural children of color on a chicken farm. Apart from that network, I received few invitations to dinner or for relationship building. The experience was somewhat sobering: I was among a nation of people of color and felt like an outsider, even among locals who spoke English. In the motherland, my skin color was not a passport to close friendships or bonding experiences.

An incident in Dar es Salaam stays with me even today. While returning from an early Sunday morning trip to an oceanfront market to buy fresh fish for dinner, our Jeep ran out of gas. At the time, gasoline was being rationed throughout Tanzania and driving motor vehicles after the noon hour was prohibited. Stranded on the side of the road, we took photos of what we considered a “Kodak moment.” Suddenly without warning, police arrived on the scene, announced that we were taking photos in a restricted area, and arrested us. We were taken to police headquarters, my camera was confiscated, and we were interrogated for several hours. Thank goodness no one was incarcerated. However, we were required to report to the police station daily for the next week, which I later learned was so the camera and film could be examined and authorities could secretly monitor our activities to ensure we weren’t involved in espionage.

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Despite that harrowing experience, I have fond memories of my stay in Tanzania (particularly climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro and visiting the Ngorongoro National Park and Game Reserve), including:

African Rain

From the stoop, I like to watch the
old men shuffle over hot, dusty sands
trekking toward familiar distances.
When the rain begins, they laugh and
scurry for the Boabab's refuge,
where they reminisce of their youth,
when puddles were their mischief
and frolic their habit.

I moved back to Detroit in May 1982 following a two-year stint with a Washington, D.C., law firm and became an associate with a downtown firm. Within the first week on the job, a senior partner, who was white, invited me to lunch. After lunch, I felt a tingling sensation in a molar. I asked the partner if he knew a good dentist with a downtown office who might see me right away. We went to his office where he placed a call to his dentist, who was also white. Over the speaker phone, I was introduced as "Tony Jenkins, a new lawyer at the firm who needs to see a good dentist immediately." Upon explanation of my pain, the dentist told me I needed to see a specialist.

"I am going to refer you to the best dentist in the Detroit area for your type of problem. He was one of my professors when I was in dental school." Then, he added, apologetically, "But, I have to tell you that he is black." I assured him it wasn't a concern and thanked him for his assistance, wondering how he felt apologizing for the skin color of a professional whom he knew to be eminently qualified.

Let me share a more recent experience. An African-American friend of mine who holds college and law degrees from Ivy League schools and whom I know to be of good character, intelligence, industry, and

temperament, telephoned me to say that he had been passed over for partnership at his law firm. The official explanation was that he had "not yet met the firm's expectations for generating business." According to my friend's sources at his firm, however, the actual, unreported explanation for being passed over—as told to him by a friendly white senior associate at the law firm—was that "some members of the Executive Committee believe that blacks do not meet our standards for partnership." Unless there is more to my friend's story, his skin color seemed to matter, but for the wrong reason.

My experience with the dentist and my friend's experience with his law firm are reminders that while my skin color may serve me well, it can be a barrier to professional opportunities even today. My experience brings to mind the words of a songwriter whose work, as a critic, I admire:

Said, "Hey little boy, you can't go
Where the others go
'Cause you don't look like they do"
Said, "Hey, old man how can you stand
To think that way
Did you really think about it
Before you made the rules?"
...
Well, they passed a law in '64
To give those who ain't got, a little more
But it only goes so far
'Cause the law don't change another's mind
When all it sees at the hiring time
Is the line on the color bar

—Bruce Hornsby, from "The Way It Is"

I am a proponent of diversity and inclusion in the legal profession for good reasons that I have articulated in this and past President's Page columns. I am proud of the work being done by the State Bar of Michigan, particularly the Diversity Advisory Committee co-chaired by Judge Victoria Roberts and Thomas M. Cooley Law School Associate Dean John Nussbaumer. I am proud of

the growing support the SBM has garnered from individuals and legal organizations for its Pledge in Support of Diversity and Inclusion, and I am proud that the SBM will be positioned to serve as a clearinghouse in Michigan for best practices in diversity and inclusion in the legal profession sooner rather than later. If you or your organization have not yet become a signatory of the pledge, my parting words are to please do so with the intent to make a difference.

With that on the record and the end of my term rapidly approaching, a personal mantra comes to mind with increasing frequency—"Life is fragile, short and a gift: don't forget your rhythm and balance."

After an intense year of competing demands, scheduling bottlenecks, and occasional sleep deprivation, I know that the rhythm and balance of my life are not what they should be. Following the SBM Annual Meeting September 14–16 in Dearborn, a brief sojourn awaits. My luggage is packed and my iPhone is loaded with the music of icons such as Ray Charles, Eric Clapton, John Coltrane, Aretha Franklin, Elton John, James Taylor, Van Morrison, and all the legendary Motown artists. I know that somewhere along my journey, the rhythm and balance will be restored.

It has been an honor and a privilege to serve as the SBM's 76th president, and big fun as well!

Peace. ■