

Foreword

Joan White became one of my private heroes as I had the opportunity to observe and teach her five children during my years as a public school teacher. In the beginning, I knew her just as a pleasant parent who, like most parents, wanted her children to fare well in school. In the beginning, I knew her kids as ones who giggled more than most. It took longer for me to realize that the five teenagers inevitably but subtly stood out a bit from their peer groups in ways that suggested thoughtful parenting.

It wasn't that they were perfect kids. There's no such thing. It wasn't that they avoided the typical adolescent miscalculations in decision making. That's part of growing up. What set them apart seemed to be a maturity of perspective—a sort of grounding—that I thought at the time was a kind of emergent wisdom.

I knew the Whites to be a middle-class family by virtue of neighborhood. The kids dressed more or less like their classmates. I did notice, after a while, however, that although the kids' clothes were standard issue early adolescent style, none of the kids had many outfits—maybe one or two more than the days of the week would require. I didn't think much of it. I was impressed that with five kids, their clothes were always clean and unwrinkled.

The small moments that added up to my sense that these kids were firmly grounded were many and unfolded slowly.

I recall a time when one of the boys badly wanted to attend an evening school event. I knew from overheard conversations that it mattered a lot to him to share the experience with his friends. Shortly before the date of the event, I heard him explain to a group of buddies that he wouldn't be there. I could see disappointment in his eyes, but with steadfastness not typical of the age group, he simply said, "It's my brother's birthday, and in my house, we celebrate birthdays together. No exceptions." No whining, blaming, bemoaning.

Then there was a time when I had just come home from a few days in the hospital following surgery. It was June, oppressively hot, and my house was full of unpacked boxes from a very recent, poorly timed, move. One of the White's boys had a friend staying with him for a few days. Joan woke the boys early on the summer morning, explaining that she wanted to let them know their options for the day early enough so they could make a good choice. They could, she explained, work with Mr. White to cut hay in the area behind their house, or they could go to Mrs. Tomlinson's house to help with some painting that needed to be done before the boxes from her move were unpacked. I was both surprised and exuberant to respond to the doorbell and find Ken and Bobby, paint brushes in hand, standing on the porch. They didn't seem resentful. They laughed a lot as they painted and did a better job than most professionals would. They came back for three days, voluntarily—no mother-imposed "choices"—just doing a job that needed doing. Just helping and making a good time of it in the process.

In our English class, the students had a lengthy and demanding final project that capped the eighth grade. This was in precomputer times, and many students brought in papers typed by parents who wanted the work to look good. Joan, too, typed the oldest child's paper, but with a caveat. That student would have to learn to type so he or she could type the second child's paper the following year—and so on down the line. Each year that followed, with good-natured grumbling, the next child in line started early to learn to type so the brother

or sister who came next would have a competent typist for the project ahead.

Then there was the day of the sit-in at school. It was a time when protests of various sorts were common events in cities and on college campuses across the country. Some social leaders at school were angry because a popular student had been suspended for tardiness—the fourth step in what appeared to me to be a generous school tardy policy. Taking a lead from the news, they decided to hold a sit-in after second period. The school principal, who was a wise soul, got wind of the impending protest and decided that a confrontation was in no one's interest. So she came on the public address system as second period was about to end. She explained to the students that she understood they were unhappy with the tardy policy and wanted to express their feelings, and she gave students who were interested in making a statement permission to hold a five-minute sit-in. She explained exactly how things needed to work, and the students followed her directions precisely. It was a brilliant move.

Peter, the one of the White clan most likely to push the boundaries, was one of the protesters. At the end of the day, his mom arrived in the school parking lot to be one of the drivers for an overnight field trip for our English class. Still feeling heady from the power of the protest, Peter began to explain enthusiastically to Joan what had occurred earlier in the day.

As he began about the fourth or fifth sentence, she stopped him. "Let me be sure I understand what you're telling me," she said. "Are you saying that you were part of a group that decided to sit down in the hall to make a statement against school policy when you should have been in class?"

Still excited, Peter responded with a lilt, "Yes ma'am."

"Before you made that choice, did you take the time to understand how that policy came to be, Peter? Did you do anything to get the facts before you acted?"

Peter was a bit subdued, but still convinced of the rightness of his involvement. "No ma'am," he said. "I didn't do that, but it was okay because the principal gave us permission to have the sit-in."

“And did you consider that you were acting in defiance of a school leader who does so much to make this a great school,” his mom continued. “Did it occur to you that things could have gotten out of hand? Would you have had the necessary insight to handle the situation if something had gone wrong?”

Now Peter looked stricken. He wasn’t angry with his mother for taking the wind out of his sails. He was observably disappointed in himself. “Do you think it would be okay for me to take a few minutes and go inside to apologize before we leave for the trip?” he asked Joan without prompting.

Inside, he choked back tears and said to the principal, in part, “I let myself down today. I disappointed my mother. And I’m sure you must have felt disappointed in me too. When I made the decision to take part in the protest, I wasn’t wise enough to realize the choice could have led to a situation I am not experienced enough to handle. And it didn’t occur to me that my decision was disrespectful of your work. I want you to know I have learned something from this and will do my best to be a better citizen of the school as a result.”

Not exactly a typical adolescent response.

Joan lived out the values Debbie Silver commends in this book. All of the kids were smart, but I never saw an indication that they felt they had more to contribute than any of their peers. They never felt entitled—at least not for long. They worked hard, not to make the best grades in the class, but always to do *their* best. If a job was hard to do, they learned to work harder. If they fell down seven times, they got up eight, sometimes with coaching from their parents. From that, they *earned* a sense of resilience and self-efficacy. There were always clear “fences” in their lives—boundaries they knew not to cross—but within those structures, they were guided in making thoughtful choices. They came to understand the centrality of family, loyalty to friends, gratitude to the many people who contributed to their betterment, and the compassion to reach out to people who need a hand.

I learned after knowing the family for many years, there was an additional “challenge” in raising the kids as Joan and

her husband did. The family had access to considerable inherited wealth. That may not sound like much of a handicap, but abundance too often becomes a reason to feel entitled, to act from a sense of power and privilege, to overlook the contributions of people who are less well off. I've always found it interesting that this set of parents opted not to let their children know their futures were financially secure. They lived simply. They taught the kids to work for what they got and to appreciate what they had.

Over the years, I came to know the Whites well. The five kids now have teenagers of their own, and they stay in touch from time to time. Without exception, they are happy, productive, anchored adults who are passing on to their children the inner compass their parents helped them develop.

I think Joan would have liked this book. I think her children and their children would as well.

Carol Ann Tomlinson